

# **Inequality Intensified: The Social Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women in the Global South**

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## ***Abstract***

*This paper provides a critical review of the differential effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic, on different societal groups. Conceptual analysis is provided to explain why the effects of COVID-19 when considered through an intersectional lens, reveal new manifestations of inequality. Intersectional analysis is an effective social science tool with which to identify the effects of multiple causal factors, which result in increased social inequality for certain social groups compared to others. Methodology and conceptual approach are provided by an empirical theoretical analysis of grey literature. Non-governmental organisation (NGO) and state-sponsored policy reports, alongside media and social commentary: provide a conceptual and contextual tapestry of the effects of COVID-19 on women in the Global South.*

## **Keywords:**

*Impact of COVID-19 pandemic, Global South women's incomes, Intersectionality*

## **1. Introduction:**

### **Intersectionality required to analyse the effects of COVID-19**

The paper asks and answers the research question: 'What is the nature, manner and extent, to which the COVID-19 global pandemic has increased social inequality against women in the Global South?' In the process of this critical review, intersectional analysis was found to have revealed hitherto hidden inequality aspects of COVID-19. Inequality which would not be so clearly apparent when considered by other methods of sociological investigation.

For example, multiple incidents of cultural and/or religious practices excluding women from the Global South, from critical resource allocation decision-making leadership roles. The paper is to be viewed through an intersectional lens, describing people's personal characteristics, which act as multiple disadvantages when interacting with social actors. Intersectionality can be defined as the effect of people's demographic profile, complete with multiple inequalities, mainly class, gender and race on their lived experiences. <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup> Analysing the social impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on women in the Global South, means recognising existing multiple inequalities intersect with the harms caused by the global emergency; to produce disproportionate impacts of the public health emergency against women and girls.<sup>[3]</sup> Intersectionality moves beyond considering each individual demographic factor separately.<sup>[4]</sup> Instead intersectionality focuses upon the relationships and interactions between people's demographic characteristics, across multiple levels of society (see also 'matrix of domination', Collins, 2000, 18).<sup>[5]</sup> Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of people's multiple inequalities, any analysis which does not take intersectionality sufficiently into account is flawed. An analysis with such intersectionality deficit, cannot hope to fully discover the social impacts of COVID-19 on women in the Global South. <sup>[6]</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Crenshaw, 1989, p139.

<sup>2</sup> Crenshaw, 1991, p1245.

<sup>3</sup> Benini, 18 January 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Erwin et al., 2021, p2.

<sup>5</sup> See also 'matrix of domination', Collins, 2000, p18. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) work is aligned with Crenshaw's (1989; 1991) 'intersectionality' concept. Collin's 'matrix of domination' concept explains how intersecting multiple inequalities are organised.

<sup>6</sup> Crenshaw, 1989, p140.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The following words were used in internet searches to compile this critical review:

**Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women in the Global South 2021** (74,200,000).

**Impact COVID-19 Pandemic on Incomes Women in the Global South 2021**  
(31,000,000).

**Impact COVID-19 Pandemic health social care Women Global South 2021**  
(38,300,000).

The internet searches were conducted during September 2021. The number given at the end of each search term, is the approximate number of search results for each theme. The search engine used in this critical review was Netscape.<sup>7</sup>

## **3. Results**

There have been significant income losses caused by COVID-19, they have fallen disproportionately on women in the Global South. Unsustainable levels of debt have built up, Global South women will be the slowest to recover. Food insecurity will rise. Due to patriarchal barriers, many women and girls in the Global South will show signs of deprivation, hunger and malnutrition.

There is clearly a shadow pandemic of hidden unreported gender-based abuse.

There is global realisation, there is no wealth without societal health.

## **4. Discussion**

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had a debilitating effect on already marginalised women, in income poor households in the Global South. Such women often experience societal inequality, manifest in their class, race and especially their gender. For many

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<sup>7</sup> see also Rethlefsen et al., 2021, p7.

women in the Global South due to their multiple inequalities, COVID-19 has had a profound affect, social inequality has intensified in their lived experiences. These personal demographic characteristics intersect with each other, to put Global South women at a disadvantage compared to men or women in the Global North. Patricia Collins (2015) argues intersectional analysis highlights the power relationships, social institutions, practices, social problems, and other social phenomena associated with social inequality. Also, that 'Definitions constitute starting points for investigation rather than end points of analysis.'<sup>[8]</sup> Evaluating policy responses to COVID-19 using intersectionality analysis, provides theoretical underpinning of an iterative process enabling an intellectual and political consensus identifying social inequality.<sup>[9]</sup> This paper describes how the COVID-19 global pandemic, has had a disproportionately higher adverse effect on women in the Global South. Comparisons are made through the critical lens of intersectionality, which articulated gender separation in the Global South. Intersectional analysis found that cultural traditions and religious practices, exacerbated the social impact of COVID-19 against women in the Global South. One long term benefit from the COVID-19 pandemic, is a significant raising of global awareness of baked in structural gender inequality in the Global South. There are patriarchal cultural practices which deny Global South women any say regarding how household finances including their own wages are disbursed. COVID-19 has increased gender-based discrimination in employment and at home, due to the gender bias child rearing and care giving roles. These now visible increases have caused alarm and dismay in many Global North countries.

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<sup>8</sup> Collins, 2015, p2.

<sup>9</sup> Collins, 2015, p3.

### **5.COVID-19 pandemic social impact: Falling incomes for Global South women**

Job and wage income loss has been substantial for most and particularly hard for women in the Global South during the COVID-19 pandemic. <sup>[10]</sup> Many such women work in the informal economy, in the agricultural sector, cleaning, or in retail on a market stall. COVID-19 has temporarily ended a significant amount of informal work, which has produced a fall in demand and reduced wages for women. <sup>[11]</sup> Informal workers mainly women are faced with a huge household income dilemma. They can break local COVID-19 quarantine rules, risking their own and other family member's health, also legal sanctions for lockdown violation. Alternatively, they observe quarantine requirements, not go to work and lose that household income, now finding themselves unable to pay for food, heating or rent. Often having complied with lockdown rules, they find that they have lost their precarious employment in the informal sector. Many women were forced or prepared to break COVID-19 lockdown rules to obtain employment and subsequently keep working. A significant structural factor causing this household income dilemma, is that many Global South countries do not have a social protection system in place. Of the few schemes which do, exist most women in the workforce don't qualify, so can't access them. <sup>[12]</sup> This leads to short-term household income cuts with long-term if not irreversible effects, e.g., households selling assets, accumulating indebtedness, or malnutrition for children. <sup>[13]</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Parsitau, 28 January 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Guterres, 2020, p2.

<sup>12</sup> Paremoer et al., 2021, p2.

<sup>13</sup> Casale and Posel, 2021, p8.

In the Global South, women are finding they are having to provide unpaid hours of care work in the home. The causal factors driving this social feature include entrenched patriarchal social norms, embedding a structural barrier that women must do this work not men. These norms foster exclusion and legitimise exclusion of and violence against women, young people, internally displaced persons and marginalised communities in the Global South. <sup>[14]</sup> It's this type of causal factor that demonstrates we need to shift the discourse, so other people's view of life are equally heard. We need to change the source of the societal narrative in the Global South, so more women's voices are heard. <sup>[15]</sup> International development organisations are extremely worried regarding the negative effects of COVID-19 on women globally. Development practitioners feel international responses to the pandemic should apply intersectionality to protect women. Global Covid-19 responses should ask: *"Are women and Person-centred, using intersectional analysis to map differentiated impacts on vulnerable groups that are already affected by the intersecting powers of globalisation, fundamentalisms, militarism and patriarchy."* <sup>[16]</sup>

To repair the damage done to women's lived experiences caused by COVID-19 in the Global South, there need to be transformative societal solutions. Patriarchal structural barriers, which prevent women from controlling their own money or having property rights need to be dismantled. Seeing the social scars left by COVID-19 on women, establishes the need to approach critical resource allocation through the prism of a feminist intersectional lens. This approach would incorporate bell hooks' (1982) homage to

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<sup>14</sup> Gure and Figueras, January 2021, p1.

<sup>15</sup> Global Health 50/50, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), 20 February 2021.

feminism, which is described as follows: “...I chose to re-appropriate the term “feminism” to focus on the fact that to be “feminist” in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination and oppression.”<sup>[17]</sup> Intersectionality recognises that the same crisis, e.g. natural, war or in our case a global health emergency, affect men and women differently. The main reason for the variance is due to existing power relationships between these two genders. Erwin et al. (2021, p3) apply Collins’ (2000, p23) ‘matrix of domination’ theory in their intersectionality work. They explain how intersecting personal characteristics interact, to create different lived experiences when accessing public provision. More women than men lost employment during COVID-19.

The relative global policy failures suggest a major rethink is required, not just in international development responses but on pandemic preparedness to protect women.<sup>[18]</sup> The rethink needs to consider the impact of COVID-19 on women in employment and the home. For example, quarantine restrictions and social distancing requirements are problematical for women in the Global South, due to cultural patriarchal relationships.<sup>[19]</sup><sup>[20]</sup> The approach to economies and recognition of ‘value’ needs to be reconsidered under a requirement to explore the state-citizenship relationship more equitably.<sup>[21] [22] [23]</sup> There is

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<sup>17</sup> hooks, 1982, p195.

<sup>18</sup> Wenham et al., 2020, p847.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Ali, 2021, p335.

<sup>20</sup> Forsythe and Pichioni, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Leach et al., 2021, p9.

<sup>22</sup> Hawaii State Commission on the Status of Women (HSCSW), 2020, p1.

<sup>23</sup> Mactaggart, 2020, p32.

a critical need to apply intersectionality, people's social identity their characteristics, to consider how they shape a person's adaptability in a crisis. Because people's outcomes during COVID-19 significantly differ, agencies need to better address how various aspects of a person's make up can result in inequality. There has been a financial shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, families need cash for food and rent until the economy rebalances and recovers. National policies of targeting loans or social protection projects to women are required, as paid employment has been made scarce by the pandemic. There needs to be policies to ensure women receive COVID-19 relief payments, which have been taken from or withheld from women by men.<sup>[24]</sup> This type of shock has provided a form of higher explanatory power, a rationale to justify macroeconomic policy interventions for women.<sup>[25]</sup> The global furlough or unemployment insurance type interventions have been successful, unfortunately few Global South women qualified for their country's income protection scheme. Evidence suggests the generous income scheme policies did not have a substantially negative effect on employment levels.<sup>[26]</sup> There is an expectation the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will result in job losses, caused by a slump in demand post-COVID-19. Women in the Global South will be hardest hit as paid childcare and domestic opportunities reduce as the economy shrinks. Global income policies must change to ensure all people have sufficient income to live independently and sustainably, during a future global public health emergency.

Current policies and programs in response to COVID-19 need to be changed, to accommodate people's adaptive capability to withstand a social shock. People's multiple

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<sup>24</sup> Abu Habib, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Cirera et al., 2020, p51.

<sup>26</sup> Dube, 2021, p4.

inequalities, including living under patriarchal power relationships, could be limiting their access to adaptation resources and pandemic participation in institutions. Women's mobility has reduced substantially compared to men during COVID-19. Women had to take on more carer duties and were afraid of either contracting the virus or passing it on to other family members. School closures and other lockdown measures has changed the employment market for many including Global South women. The length of school closure in the locality affects women availability, especially with reduced women working hours causing incomes to fall. <sup>[27]</sup> Experience from past outbreaks have demonstrated the importance of conducting a gender analysis of agency responses global infections. The gender analysis needs to consider preparedness and the effectiveness of health interventions in protecting women and girls, which must also deliver health equity. *“During the 2014-16 west African outbreak of the Ebola virus disease, gendered norms meant that women were more likely to be infected by the virus, given their predominant roles as care givers within families and as front-line health-care workers.”* <sup>[28]</sup><sup>[29]</sup>

## **6. Conclusions**

An unintended benefit of the COVID-19 global pandemic is that we can observe at first hand in real time the position of various agencies. Social actors who interact with women in the Global South in education, employment, food supply, healthcare, heating resources, legislature, sexual health and reproduction. <sup>[30]</sup> These social actors include agencies who form part of the social architecture, with which marginalised women have their lived

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<sup>27</sup> Caselli et al., 2021, p136.

<sup>28</sup> Wenham et al., 2020, p847.

<sup>29</sup> see also Filipova et al., 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2020.

experiences. The perceived stigma of having an infectious disease is gendered in many Global South societies. During the coronavirus period, people have seen how Global South women are under-represented in critical resource allocation decision-making and political fora. Cultural and religious practices where women must give their wages to their husband or partner, have been laid bare by COVID-19.

*“The paper is a call to action in science – both in the application of existing knowledge about viral and human nature and also to make discoveries that would not be possible except when a global experiment is underway.”<sup>[31]</sup>*

Another unintended outcome is the COVID-19 pandemic has brought forward the proliferation of homeworking using mobile telephone and laptops. This will result in something of a convergence of gender equality for women living in Global South countries. The post-COVID-19 digital homeworking age will widely display what we’ve known all along, women are equal to men in organisational management office-based roles. Increased homeworking will have an emancipatory effect on women generally. The societal expectation and norm of childcare responsibilities although declining continue to fall on women. Global changes in employment patterns enable both childcare and paid work to be done relatively easily from home.

The COVID-19 global pandemic will have long-lasting, social, political and economic effects, for example, by being the catalyst for international vaccine passports. There is much knowledge to be learnt, the coronavirus crisis is the first global public health emergency where gender and sex differences have been recorded. Researchers and policy

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<sup>3131</sup> Erwin et al., 2021, 27774.

makers have the chance to identify any changes in behaviour and provide explanations for the reasons why.<sup>[32]</sup> For example, clearly the labour market has changed, many people need training in how to remain productive whilst working from home. Retail has changed, the demotion of high street to online shopping has decreased the need for sales assistants, being replaced with digital webpage designers. Women will be required to do their online paid work as well as family social care duties. This could result in overloaded by workload issues, mental health problems, with women increasingly being unable to perform self-care. Heart attack, obesity and stroke rates could increase, if people continue to stay at home post-COVID-19 they will exercise less. To varying degrees all these issues can have an impact on gender inequality against Global South women.

The coronavirus vaccine has been rolled out apace, it appears the COVID-19 global pandemic is coming to an end. There is a human rights dimension to the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring a rights-respecting response that addresses the needs of the groups most at risk. There are a wide variety of responses which can be made, some of which should be positive for example, providing testing and treatment. Other responses may prove problematical for example, boosting access to water and sanitation. A global societal rethink is essential in the post-COVID-19 period, regarding how the worldwide population is to be protected during a global crisis. The extensive quote below aptly describes the universality approach which is needed. Directly or indirectly, issues of global access: to education, food security, gender inequality; income; political representation; sexual health and reproduction; sustainable livelihoods and universal healthcare, are all identified as global societal concerns which must be addressed. The disproportionate manner in which

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<sup>32</sup> Lewis, 2020.

structural inequalities harm women in the Global South must not be repeated post-COVID-19.<sup>[33]</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> House of Commons (HoC), 2021, p7.

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