

Gender Inequality and Food Insecurity in the Asian Food System During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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GENDER INEQUALITY AND FOOD INSECURITY IN THE ASIAN FOOD SYSTEM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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I. INTRODUCTION

About 70%–80% of farmland in low-income countries is managed by smallholders (Lowder et al. 2016), where women play a crucial role as family and hired labor. Women make up a substantial portion of the agricultural labor force within the low- and lower middle-income countries in the Asia and Pacific region. Close to 70% and 50% of all employed women in the low- and lower middle-income countries, respectively, in the Asia and Pacific region, were employed in agriculture in 2019 (ILO 2021). Women play a crucial role in the global food system as producers and laborers in plantations and processing plants (Malapit et al. 2020). Women are typically responsible for selling, buying, and cooking food for the family. They also contribute to household food and nutritional security through homestead-based poultry, livestock, vegetables, and fruit production.

Despite women's active participation in agriculture and their invaluable contribution to global food security, they are significantly more likely to experience food insecurity than men worldwide (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO 2020). In 2019, controlling for socioeconomic characteristics, women were 13% more likely than men to experience either moderate or severe food insecurity and 27% more likely than men to experience severe food insecurity (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO 2020). The gender gap in food insecurity widened in 2019 compared to 2018, but remained mostly unchanged compared to 2014. The pre-existing gender difference in food security is expected to intensify from 2020 onwards because of the economic fallout from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. As movement restrictions and other infection-containment measures severely curtail food access for both men and women, women are expected to bear a disproportionately higher burden of the adverse impact. This is because the hardships induced by COVID-19 infection-containment measures are expected to exacerbate existing gender inequality in employment, wages, and access to and control over resources and income. Consequently, the predicted rise in extreme poverty is expected to be disproportionately borne by women (UN Women 2020). The

following sections elaborate on these issues. Section II discusses general trends and patterns in women's engagement in the food system and key gender gaps in rural and agrarian societies. Section III summarizes early evidence of how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these gender gaps.

II. OVERVIEW: GENERAL TRENDS AND PATTERNS OF GENDER INEQUALITY

A. Women's Role in Agriculture as Paid and Unpaid Labor

The role of women and their degree of involvement in agriculture varies across countries, regions, communities, and cropping systems. Women's role in agriculture is guided by norms and formal and informal rules that define gender roles and labor division and the socioeconomic characteristics of women, such as caste, class, and ethnicity. In South Asia, men take the lead in land preparation, crop management, machine operation, and marketing, while women are primarily involved in postharvest activities and assist men with seedbed and nursery preparation (Ahmed et al. 2013). Since women's work in South Asia remains mostly in the background, women are rarely recognized as farmers, and their contribution to the food system is either ignored or undervalued. However, women are emerging as frontline agricultural workers in areas where the male outmigration rate is high, and off-farm wage opportunities for women are low. Khatri-Chhetri et al. (2020) identify 21 districts in Nepal as women–agriculture–climate risk hotspots where women spend more time in agriculture than men and face multiple climate change-related production risks. More recent studies from dominant rice-based cropping system areas of India reveal a high involvement of low-income and lower-caste women in agriculture as laborers for transplanting, weeding, and harvesting (Khatri-Chhetri et al. 2020; and Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020). Gartaula et al. (2020) find that about 60% of the total labor required for rice transplanting is undertaken by women in India's 16 major rice-growing districts.

In Southeast Asia, men take the lead role in seedbed and land preparation and pesticide and fertilizer application, while women are involved in crop establishment, weeding, manual harvesting, postharvest activities, and marketing (Akter et al. 2016, 2017). In Southeast Asian agriculture, women are more visible, and they exercise a greater degree of decision-making power and autonomy than women in South Asia. The gender gaps in access to extension services and access to and control over income and resources in Southeast Asia are

considerably lower than in South Asia (Akter et al. 2016, 2017; and Malapit et al. 2020). Women's workload varies between lean and peak seasons and across farming practices. In countries and areas where manual rice transplanting is common for crop establishment (e.g., the Philippines), women's drudgery is a serious issue compared to places where broadcasting is the dominant method of rice crop establishment, e.g., Thailand and South Sumatra (Indonesia) (Akter et al. 2017). Farm mechanization has considerably alleviated women's drudgery in Thailand and South Sumatra (Indonesia) in the last decade, while in highly non-mechanized farming systems, such as in the Philippines and Timor-Leste, women experience health problems and time poverty because of the high peak season workload (Akter et al. 2016, 2017).

Unequal distribution of unpaid reproductive (e.g., cooking, cleaning, fetching water, collection of fuel) and care (e.g., looking after children, sick, and elderly) work is prevalent in most rural societies of Asia (Mathew 2019; and ILO 2020) because of patriarchal gender norms. Women bear double the work burden as they make substantial contributions to subsistence agriculture as unpaid family labor and do most of the unpaid household work (Rubiano-Matulevich and Viollaz 2019). Globally, women spend at least 2.5 times more time doing unpaid household and care work than men (ILO 2016; and Rubiano-Matulevich and Viollaz 2019). In Asia, the gender difference in unpaid work is much higher. Women spend as much as 10 times more time in household work than men in some Asian countries (e.g., Pakistan, India, and Cambodia) (Charmes 2019). Reproductive and care work is the dominant reason for women's lower participation in paid work than men. More than half of economically inactive women stay out of the labor force in Asia and the Pacific because of unpaid household and care work responsibilities (ILO 2018).

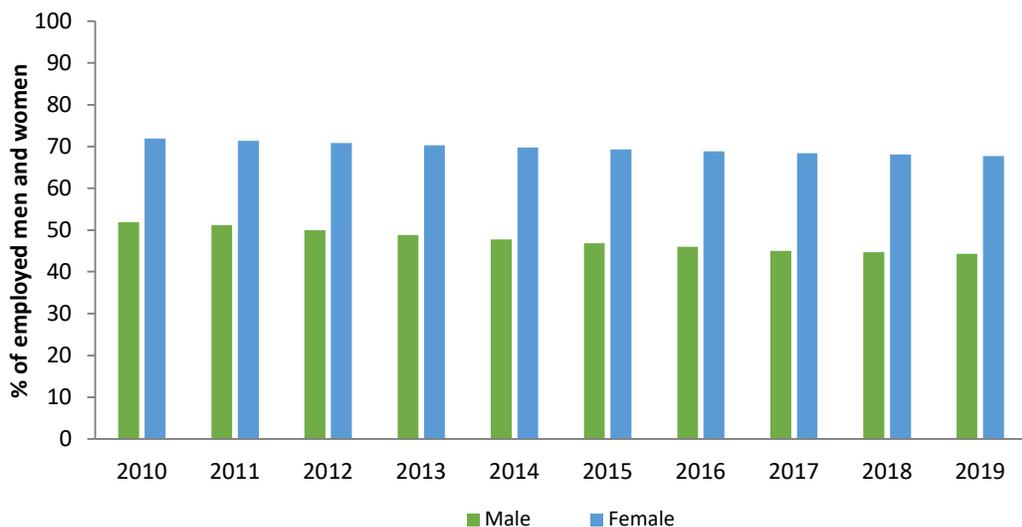
B. Trend in Women's Share of Rural Employment in Asian Agriculture

In low- and lower middle-income countries in the Asia and Pacific region, relatively more economically active women are employed in agriculture than men (Figures 1 and 2). In upper middle-income countries, slightly more economically active men than women are employed in agriculture (Figure 3). Agricultural feminization in low- and lower middle-income countries was driven by a multitude of factors, including the Green Revolution that increased the demand for unskilled labor and, more recently, rapid structural changes that have contributed to a growing trend of male outmigration and men leaving farm work for non-farm employment (Slavchevska et al. 2016). Additionally, because of climate change-related weather shocks,

rural households use income diversification as a risk-coping strategy; that is, men focus on nonagricultural income-generation activities, while women shoulder the responsibility of managing farm activities (Rigg and Salamanca 2017). The feminization of agriculture is also taking place through (i) women performing a higher share of agricultural work than men (Slavchevska et al. 2016; Gartaula et al. 2020; and Khatri-Chhetri et al. 2020); and (ii) women’s empowerment growing in agriculture. That is, women’s effective participation in agriculture is increasing through higher decision-making powers and greater control over resources and income (Akter and Chindarkar 2020; and Akter and Francis-Tan 2020).

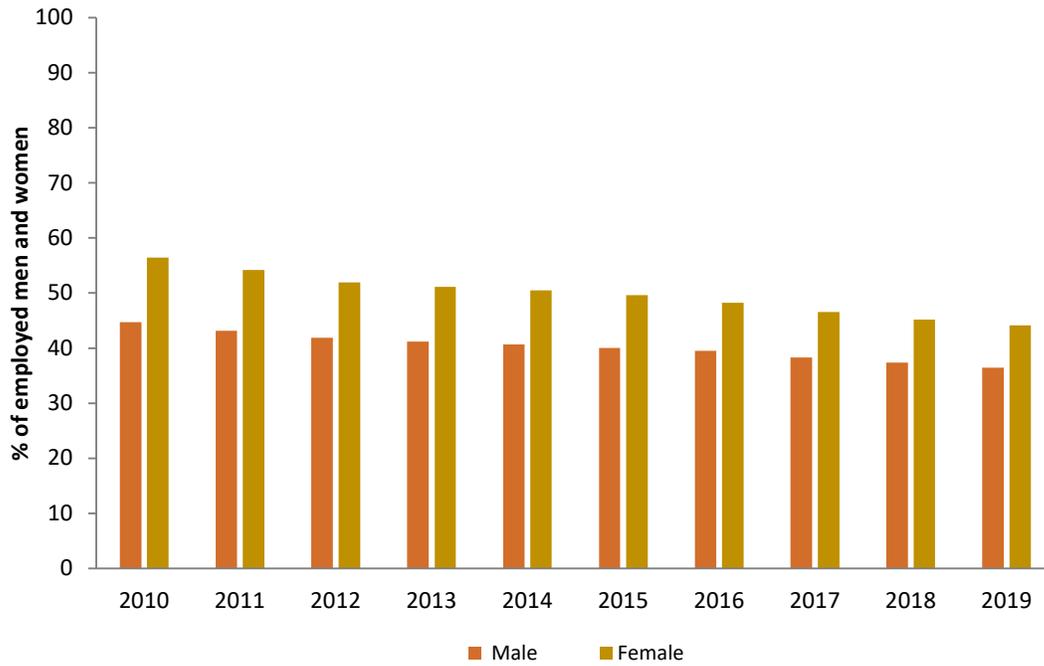
In all income groups, participation of both men and women in agriculture has fallen in the past decade (Figures 1, 2, and 3). The change is driven by a multitude of factors, including structural transformation, stagnation of agricultural wage rate, low return from agriculture (low farm gate price), ageing agricultural workforce, and high risk of crop failure because of climate change (Mehrotra et al. 2014; Zhang et al. 2014; and Malapit et al. 2020). The rate of decline in men’s agricultural participation (7.5%) is higher than that of women (4%) in low-income countries, while women are moving out of agriculture at a greater pace (12.3%) than men (8.3%) in lower middle-income countries in the Asia and Pacific region. This is likely because women have higher off-farm employment opportunities than men in lower middle-income countries, particularly in highly labor-intensive apparel and footwear industries and the booming services sector in Southeast Asia and South Asia (Zhang et al. 2014; and Maligalig et al. 2019).

Figure 1: Participation of Men and Women in Agriculture in Low-Income Countries in the Asia and Pacific Region



Source: ILO. ILOSTAT. <https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/> (accessed 30 June 2021).

Figure 2: Participation of Men and Women in Agriculture in Lower Middle-Income Countries in the Asia and Pacific Region



Source: ILO. ILOSTAT. <https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/> (accessed 30 June 2021).

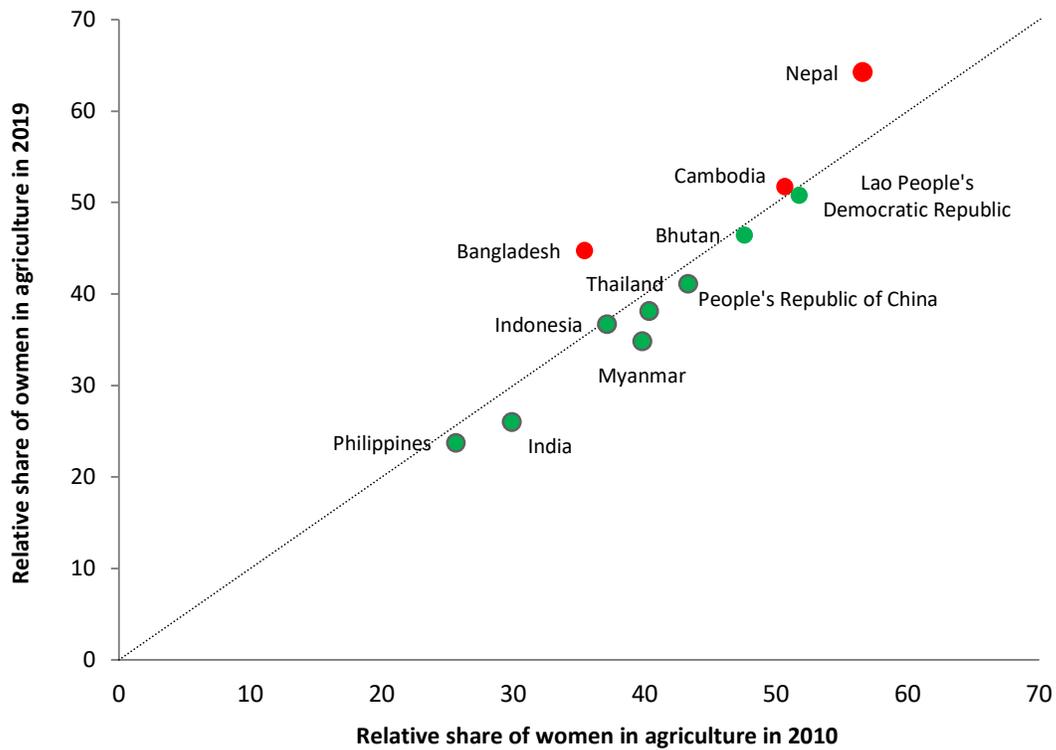
Figure 3: Participation of Men and Women in Agriculture in Upper Middle-Income Countries in the Asia and Pacific Region



Source: ILO. ILOSTAT. <https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/> (accessed 30 June 2021).

Figure 4 presents women’s participation in agriculture relative to men between 2010 and 2019 in selected Asian countries that experienced high economic growth. In some countries (e.g., Bangladesh, Nepal, and Cambodia), women’s participation relative to men increased, while women’s relative participation remained unchanged or slightly declined in other countries.

Figure 4: Changes in the Relative Share of Women’s Participation in Agriculture between 2010 and 2019 in Selected Asian Countries



Source: ILO. ILOSTAT. <https://ilostat ilo.org/data/> (accessed 30 June 2021).

C. Gender Wage and Employment Gap

Although women’s participation in agriculture in Asia as a wage laborer has increased in recent decades, women’s wage rate in agriculture has remained considerably lower than men (Mahajan 2017; and Briones 2018). In the Philippines, women earned, on average, 6–8 percentage points lower wages than men from 2012 to 2016 (Briones 2018). Mahajan (2017) finds that female daily wage rates for agricultural labor in 14 Indian states from 1993 to 2007 were 72% of males. In Indonesia, the average gender wage gap among agricultural laborers from 2011 to 2019 was 23.6% (Fauzi 2020).

Two factors drive the gender wage gap. First, there is gender-based segregation of tasks that demarcates jobs of men and women. Evidence shows that women's work is usually undervalued and paid less than male tasks. Second, the gender wage gap is determined by gender-based discrimination, where women get paid less for equal work. For example, Briones (2018) undertakes a decomposition exercise of the gender wage gap for agriculture in the Philippines and concludes that the wage difference for the same activity is the main source of the gender wage gap.

In addition to receiving low wages in the agricultural labor market, women have few opportunities to access nonagricultural wage work that offers better remuneration (Garikipati 2008). Women's reproductive responsibilities limit their ability to migrate to a different location for a better-paying job. Women's lack of access to resources and control over income and ownership of assets further restricts their capacity to enhance their income through self-employment. Men's ability to migrate and access high-paid off-farm wage income opportunities reinforces the widening of gender disparity in income and asset ownership, thereby deteriorating women's position in society relative to men.

D. Access to Resources, Inputs, and Information; Control Over Income; Asset Ownership and Control

The gender gap persists for resource access, asset ownership, and control over income (Meinzen-Dick et al. 2011, 2014). Despite women's significant contribution in paid and unpaid work, they own fewer resources than men and lack access to land, capital, information, inputs, training, and markets (Alkire et al. 2013; Akter et al. 2017, 2020; and Malapit et al. 2020). Women also lack control over the income of agricultural produce and their labor income. These disparities translate to low intra-household bargaining power and autonomy for women making life choices (Akter and Chindarkar 2020). Although some progress is evident in gender gaps in resource ownership, access, and control in some Southeast Asian countries (Akter et al. 2017), considerable gaps persist in many Asian countries, particularly South Asian countries (Akter and Francis-Tan 2020). The gender-asset gap is an outcome of patriarchal inheritance and marriage dissolution practices in Asia that discriminates against women (Quisumbing et al. 2015). Even in areas where men and women hold joint land ownership, women are rarely named in the land title (Akter et al. 2017). Moreover, women's assets are more likely to be liquidated in time of crisis (Rakib and Matz 2016; and Quisumbing et al. 2018). Women own small assets, such as livestock, poultry, and jewelry, which can be sold off quickly and easily

relative to large assets, such as land and houses. Further, women feel more responsible for protecting their family and ensuring an uninterrupted food supply. Hence, they feel a sense of urgency to quickly respond to a crisis to protect their family's well-being.

In addition to the persistent gender gaps in asset ownership and access to and control over income and resources, women and girls face discrimination in intra-household resource allocation (Zimmermann 2012; Doss 2013; and Hossain et al. 2021), leading to poor health and nutritional outcomes for women and girls and high rates of female and girl child mortality (Sen 2003; and Mehrotra 2006). Various estimates suggest that the number of 'missing women'—those who would be alive in the absence of sex discrimination—globally is between 100 million and 136 million (Sen 1992; and Bongaarts and Guilmoto 2015). Most of these missing women are from the People's Republic of China and India, accounting for more than 80% of the estimated missing women globally in 2015 (Bongaarts and Guilmoto 2015). The literature presents consistent evidence that women and girls bear the brunt of economic shocks as households reduce family resources allocated for the well-being of women and girls to smooth consumption during good and bad times (Rose 1999; and Kumala Dewi and Dartanto 2019).

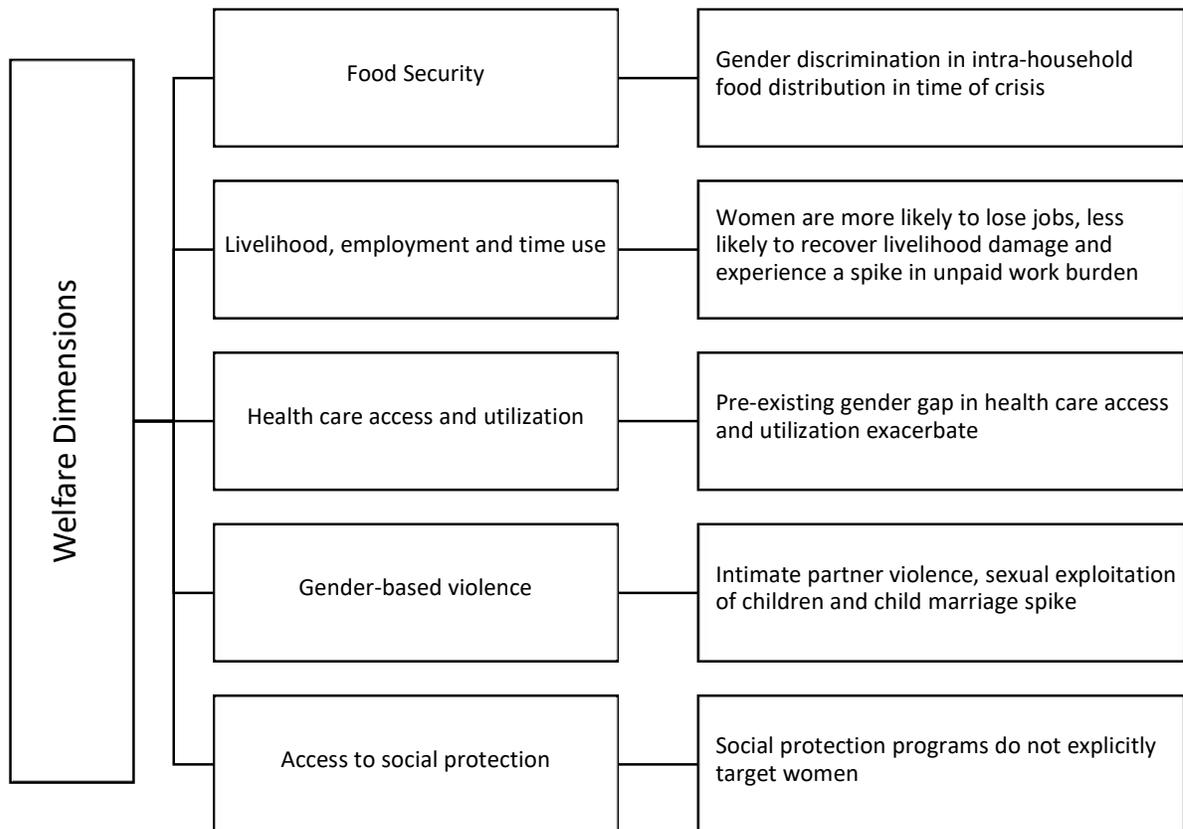
III. GENDER INEQUALITY AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC

While the pandemic's direct health impact has not been as severe in rural areas as in densely populated urban areas, rural livelihoods and other aspects of life have been indirectly impacted by the pandemic and its containment measures. Most of the population in low- and lower middle-income countries have lost access to food because of shortages in income and purchasing power (Hamadani et al. 2020; and Gupta et al. 2020). Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic are expected to be hit the hardest by income and livelihood losses (WFP 2020).

Remittance sent by migrant household members has been an effective coping mechanism for rural households in Asia during past major covariate shocks (e.g., flooding, drought, earthquake, and cyclone) (Le De et al. 2013; Akter and Basher 2014; and Combes et al. 2014). With the major migrant-receiving countries in the Middle East and Europe being severely hit by the pandemic and a decline in demand for goods and services worldwide, highly remittance-dependent Asian economies have witnessed a deep plunge in their remittance income and an influx of migrants returning to their home countries (Lee et al. 2021; and Ullah et al. 2021). The widespread lockdown measures shattered the prospect of finding short-term employment

for seasonal migrants in countries like India, Bangladesh, and Nepal (Shahare 2021). Additionally, there was a mass exodus of the urban population to their rural roots following the lockdown announcement, increasing food demand in rural areas (Denis et al. 2020). Charitable giving, another important economic lifeline for poor households during previous shock episodes (Mozumder et al. 2009), has also been hampered by the pandemic (Bamzai 2020). These changes in the rural economy, labor market, movement restrictions, and household income dynamics pose unprecedented challenges for rural women, and thus invoke negative consequences for various dimensions of women’s welfare. Figure 5 summarizes the impact pathway for the effect of COVID-19 on five broad welfare dimensions. The following sections discuss the impact pathway and present supporting evidence.

Figure 5: Impact of COVID-19 on Rural Women’s Welfare



COVID-19 = coronavirus disease.

Source: Author.

A. Gendered Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security

The most common strategies for coping with food shortages are eating less food, switching to less-preferred and less-nutritious food, skipping meals, liquidating assets, dissaving, borrowing money, relying on government and nongovernment aid, and, as a last resort, borrowing food from neighbors (BRAC 2020, Gupta et al. 2020, and Hamadani et al. 2020). Such coping mechanisms are rarely gender-neutral. Women are more likely to skip meals or reduce portion sizes than men. Women's food deprivation is the outcome of gender-based discrimination of intra-household resource allocation discussed in the previous section (Harris-Fry et al. 2017). Instead of biological needs at different stages of the life cycle, food consumption is determined by gender norms. Women are expected to eat last and little, and adjust by sacrificing meals in times of crisis. Chronic food deprivation increases the risk of malnutrition and anaemia in women and girls, which are the leading causes of maternal death and child mortality in low-income countries (Perez-Escamilla et al. 2018).

A series of CARE surveys in Bangladesh and Afghanistan during the pandemic reveals consistent evidence of the gender gap in food security during the COVID-19 pandemic (CARE, 2020). One-third of the female respondents in Bangladesh mentioned that they had curtailed their food consumption to maintain their savings for their households' benefit. In Afghanistan, female respondents reported skipping more meals than male respondents. Early evidence from India reveals a similar gender gap pattern for food insecurity (Agarwal 2021). In addition to reducing the portion and number of meals, women and households headed by women reduced their consumption of nutritious and diverse foods. Harris et al. (2020) report that women farmers were significantly more likely than men to reduce their consumption of vegetables, fruits, and dairy.

B. Gendered Impact of COVID-19 on Livelihood, Employment, and Time Use

According to the latest ILO estimate, in low- and lower middle-income countries, the informal economy workers suffered an 82% decline in income because of the COVID-19 lockdown (ILO 2020). Early evidence from India suggests that women are considerably more likely (20 percentage points) to lose employment and incur a higher income loss than men (Deshpande, 2020a; and Lahoti et al. 2020). A survey of 2,317 households conducted by BRAC in rural areas of Bangladesh reveals that households headed by women (80%) were more likely to lose income because of lockdown measures than households headed by men (75%). In India,

women faced increased competition in the rural labor market, with male migrants returning home and seeking employment in government-funded rural employment generation programs (Agarwal 2021). The share of women's workdays under India's flagship rural employment program—the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme—dropped from 55% in 2019–2020 to 52.7% in 2020–2021 (Agarwal 2021).

Women's reduced working hours are also a direct consequence of the increased burden of unpaid work as a family laborer and reproductive and care work. With acute labor shortages during the harvesting and planting seasons, female household members had to step in to fill the shortfall. Women spent significantly more time as family labor during planting and harvesting seasons (CIP 2020). Additionally, women's household and care work burden increased manifold because of school closures, sick elderly family members, and returned migrant members. More than half (55%) of the surveyed women who participated in the BRAC survey in Bangladesh faced additional domestic and unpaid care work because of school closures, returning migrant members, and home quarantine (BRAC 2020). A survey in India reported an increase in women's time use for water and firewood collection in up to 71% of cases (CSO 2020). The increased time for water collection was linked to enhanced sanitary protocols for avoiding COVID-19 infections (Agarwal 2021).

Street vendors, vegetable growers, and sellers, most of whom are women, suffered substantial revenue losses because of the lack of access to markets and transportation and low demand (Harris et al. 2020; and SEWA-Bharat 2020). A telephone survey of vegetable producers from India reveals that female vegetable growers were more likely to experience lower vegetable prices than male growers because women were less able to adapt to the changing circumstances by changing their business model (Harris et al. 2020). For example, men started selling vegetables door-to-door or found a new market while women followed their conventional street vending practices (Harris et al. 2020). The mobility restriction also led to a substantial drop in the supply of agricultural inputs, such as seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers. Farms owned by women face significantly more challenges than those owned by men, which the pandemic has exacerbated. A farm-level survey conducted in Myanmar from May to August 2020 reveals that businesses owned by women have closed at a greater rate, suffered larger losses in sales and profits, and were more likely to struggle to recover from the losses than businesses managed by men (World Bank 2020).

C. Gendered Impact of COVID-19 on Health, Health Care Access, and Utilization

Although people can travel to health care facilities during lockdowns, the lack of transportation and fear of COVID-19 infections has substantially reduced health care use in rural and urban areas. Moreover, health care facilities have reduced service hours and capacity because of the paucity of personal protective equipment. They have also imposed various visitor restrictions; for example, in the early stage of the COVID-19 outbreak, access to health care facilities in many countries was conditional on a negative COVID-19 test. As most places lacked testing capacity, especially rural and remote areas, patients with COVID-19 symptoms were barred from accessing health care services.

Although both men and women lack health care access because of these constraints, women's suffering is substantially greater than men because of their higher health care needs. In particular, women at reproductive age and pregnant and lactating women need more health care services than men of similar age. A study of more than 20,000 pregnant women in Nepal reveals that, during the first 2 months of lockdown, institutional births decreased by almost 50%, neonatal deaths increased from 13 to 40 deaths per 1,000 live births, and institutional stillbirths increased from 14 to 21 per 1,000 total births (Ashish et al. 2020). These increases are because of the lack of access to a health care facility, lack of prenatal and neonatal care, late arrival at a health care facility, or reduced quality of care, or a combination of these factors (Headey and Ruel 2020; Karkee and Morgan 2020; and Ashish et al. 2020). During the Ebola crisis in West Africa, Sochas et al. (2017) found a substantial decline in antenatal care, family planning, facility delivery, and post-natal care services in Sierra Leone. The reduction in these life-saving health services is estimated to have caused 3,600 excess maternal, neonatal, and stillbirth deaths in 2014–2015 (Sochas et al. 2017).

Mental health is another area where women bore a significantly higher brunt than men. A higher percentage of women than men exhibit symptoms of depression and anxiety during lockdown or coping with isolation and other restrictive measures (Hamadani et al. 2020; and Pierce et al. 2020). Symptoms of anxiety, sleep deprivation, and depression are significantly more acute among pregnant women and women in the perinatal period (Davenport et al. 2020).

D. Impact of COVID-19 on Gender-Based Violence

Overwhelming worldwide evidence has emerged of the spike in domestic violence reports since the start of the pandemic. Especially during lockdowns, reports of domestic violence and hotline calls seeking assistance tripled in many countries, including the People's Republic of China, India, the United States, Australia, and many countries in Europe (Allen-Ebrahimian 2020; Leslie and Wilson 2020; and Usher et al. 2020). A survey of 2,174 women in Bangladesh before and after the lockdown reveals a 68% increase in emotional violence and a 56% increase in physical violence by intimate partners (Hamadani et al. 2020). Women's lack of access to support services, such as shelters, health care, police, and court activities further exacerbated women's vulnerability (John et al. 2020).

The patriarchy-induced gender power dynamics that lie at the center of physical oppression perpetrated by men on women get further skewed in times of crisis. In other words, a pandemic, movement restrictions, or shelter-in-place orders do not cause domestic violence or violence against women per se; they exacerbate existing conditions that allow such violence to exist. Similar patterns were observed during previous outbreaks, including Ebola, Cholera, Zika, and Nipah (Davies and Bennett 2016; Yasmin 2016; and Onyango et al. 2019). Dowry demand by the husband's family to ease financial hardships imposed by the lockdown is a key driver of the increased domestic violence (Khisa et al. 2020). Other drivers include stress, financial worry and frustration caused by unemployment or loss of livelihood, and anxiety caused by uncertainty (Hamadani et al. 2020). A telephone survey of almost 1,000 women in Indonesia reveals that women with jobs during the pandemic protect them from domestic violence (Halim et al. 2020) because economic empowerment reduces women's financial dependency on their husbands and gives them options for leaving abusive relationships.

In addition to intimate partner violence, other forms of gender-based violence incidents are on the rise. Women and children face a greater risk of sexual exploitation or trafficking than men (Jennings 2020; *Strait Times* 2020; and Promchertchoo 2021). In India, the national distress helpline for child services received 13% more calls during the post-lockdown period (March–August 2020), relative to the same period in 2019 (Indian Express 2020). A news media report suggests that cases of cybersex-trafficking of children by close family members have tripled in the Philippines (Wongsamuth 2020). The risk of child marriage has surged in low-income countries. The pandemic is expected to result in the untimely and forced marriage of 2.5 million more girls worldwide in the next 5 years (Save the Children 2020). South Asia is most at risk

of child marriage, with 200,000 additional girls expected to be forced into marriage in 2020 (Save the Children 2020). Early evidence from Bangladesh reveals an astronomical spike in child marriage in rural areas (Afrin and Zainuddin 2021).

An increase in child marriage is the combined effect of school closures and the pandemic's economic fallout. Schools are an opportunity for girls to receive education and a mechanism for teachers and social service workers to monitor their well-being, and a platform to intervene if they need protection from forced marriage, trafficking, or sexual exploitation. With schools being closed worldwide, social service workers lost access to girls who are vulnerable to forced marriage or other forms of exploitation. Child marriage is viewed as a shock-coping strategy for two reasons: (i) parents who are marrying off their daughters have one less mouth to feed (Affoum and Recavarren 2020) and (ii) parents who receive a child bride are often motivated by the prospect of receiving dowry from the bride's family.

E. Gender Difference in Access to Social Protection Measures

As the pandemic continues to wreak havoc worldwide, since its onset in December 2019, the number of social protection programs continues to grow to curb the pandemic's economic impacts. A common national-level response to income shocks in low-income countries has been cash or food transfer or selling of subsidized food in open markets (Headey and Martin 2016; and Akter and Basher 2014). However, the pandemic poses some unique challenges for the traditional social safety net measures. Food or cash transfer programs move at a slow pace, without a coordinated distribution plan or national database of target groups, causing distribution outlets to attract large crowds, long queues, and a high potential for leakages (Yuda 2020). Therefore, accessing food through these channels takes longer than usual, intensifying women's challenge to access food and fulfil their reproductive and care responsibilities. Additionally, the lack of public transport during the lockdown severely hindered women's ability to access food in remote areas where fair price shops are some distance away (Agarwal 2021).

As of December 2020, governments in 215 countries have proposed or implemented close to 1,500 social protection programs (Gentilini et al. 2020), including cash-based transfers, in-kind food transfers, interest-free and collateral-free credit, social pensions (e.g., unemployment benefits), and wage subsidies. However, these programs are rarely gender-inclusive (at best gender neutral) and, in most cases, have been inadequate to meet the needs of the distressed

population (Kesar et al. 2020). Additionally, the schemes lack proper consideration of gender-specific barriers and needs (Hidrobo et al. 2020). For example, the Government of Bangladesh has rolled out numerous food and nonfood social protection programs for the rural and urban poor (Bacil and Soyer 2020; and Bangladesh Planning Commission 2021). While some of these programs address the needs of vulnerable women (elderly, widowed, and divorcee), almost none of the mainstream or flagship programs offer a special concession or consideration for women in general.

A vital component of India's pandemic response strategy was a direct cash transfer of ₹500 (US\$6.85) per month for 3 months (April–June 2020) to 0.2 billion female subscribers of the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana bank accounts. This response was associated with a high rate of inclusion and exclusion error (Agarwal 2021). It excluded roughly 50% of poor women who did not have a Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana account. Additionally, banks in rural India are not ubiquitous; roughly two-thirds of rural women live within 5 kilometers away from a bank. Accessibility to banks adds another hurdle for women to access social support and, therefore, limits women's ability to access food (Somanchi 2020). India's free food grain distribution program, i.e., Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana, is another example of the lack of gender sensitivity in social protection programs. Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana aims to distribute 12 million tons of free food grain among 800 million people without a ration card (Government of India, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution 2020). It requires people to apply for an e-coupon (temporary ration card) by registering their beneficiary details on a government website. This system introduces a barrier for women to access food because of their relatively lower access to information technology and lack of smartphone ownership.

IV. DISCUSSION

One of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals is to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (SDG#5) (United Nations 2015). Evidence from highly agriculture-dependent developing countries suggests that gender equality and women's empowerment have significant positive effects on agricultural productivity and household food security, and nutritional outcomes (Harper et al. 2013; and Sraboni et al. 2014). The adverse shock induced by the economic fallout of COVID-19 has reverberated around the world, wiping out the progress made in various domains of gender equality in past decades. These adverse effects are expected to linger after the pandemic is over, making the pathway to achieving sustainable

development goals harder and longer than initially envisaged.

While the employment data show signs of improvement, women's employment improvement is much less than men's (Deshpande 2020b). A return to work does not imply an equivalent recovery in incomes, which will vary with the intensity of working hours, especially in the informal sector, and depend on seasonal labor demand in agriculture. These factors, along with high pre-COVID-19 pandemic unemployment, severe contraction of the economy, predicted rise in extreme poverty overall—disproportionately for women (UN Women 2020)—and existing structural inequalities of gender and class, mean that many of the noted adverse effects on women are likely to persist, or even worsen.

Global communities and policymakers should take urgent measures to prevent gender inequalities from exacerbating and enhance women's welfare. The most important step is to make policies gender-sensitive. Government stimulus policies and social protection programs should be better targeted and consider women's needs.

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