**Women during the pandemic**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-03-31

ONE year ago, the world ran on dif ferent rules.

The rhythm of day was different, the management of time was different, people behaved differently and were scared of different things. One custom of that bygone pre-pandemic world was the division of male and female work and space.

In Pakistan, where the number of females in the workforce is below 30 per cent, women mostly stayed at home and men went to work. When the men left in the morning, the women turned to the repetitive tasks of washing and cooking that make a household run ef ficiently.

All of this changed when the pandemic hit. Men began to stay at home either because they lost their job or because their employer wanted them to work from home. The small respite that their wives and mothers and sisters had during the day when men did not dominate and demand this or that was taken away from the women. As men stayed home day af ter day, they required waiting on, a cup of tea now, a meal prepared fresh not just for dinner but also for lunch. They dirtied dishes and created a mess.

Schools also closed and the children too made their own demands, their own messes, trapped as they were in the home. Pakistani women thus were caught in a 24/7 cycle of work, trying to sate appetites, calm tempers and maintain harmony in an uncertain and constrained world.

Women everywhere are the primary casualties of the coronavirus pandemic, having had to pay the price whether or not they were infected with the virus. Data from around the world substantiates this truth. In China, peer-reviewed studies reveal a 300pc increase in violence against women. In Lebanon, there has been a 45pc increase in violence against women. In the United Kingdom, violence against women has doubled from the 10-year average. Similar increases in violence have also been reported in Germany and Tunisia. Next door in India, the onset of the pandemic has led to at least a 21pc increase in violence against women.

The statistics quoted here are all from peerreviewed studies in journals. It is very likely that the situation is far worse than what is being reported. In Pakistan, social workers and thosewho work in shelters and in other facilities that attend to abused women, report an exponential increase. The constant presence of men and the absence of any external outlet for women have created a pressure-cooker situation.

In much of the country, women have to ask male permission to leave the home even for essential tasks; now going out and getting any kind of respite from violence has become completely impossible.

Visits from family members and meeting others at f amily occasions (which used to function as a means to ensure that women were not being maltreated) have ceased, giving abusive men carte blanche to do whatever they want to the women at home.

The situation of working women is just as bad.Those who have been told to work from home find that no one in the household seems to understand that they have to attend to work duties during work hours. These women find themselves forced to watch children and also be available for Zoom calls or other work interactions. Many others, like the 250,000 American women who were let go of by their employers in January 2021, have just lost their jobs and their income. The pandemic has set them years behind their male counterparts in career advancement.

The meaning of all these statistics is that in the post-pandemic world women will be at an even greater disadvantage than they were before it started. Those Pakistani working women who have either been fired or have had to quit their jobsbecause of the pandemic may not be able to return to work after it is over. The ability to bring in an income plays a huge role in the power women wield in their households; the lost earning potential, therefore will reduce their ability to make decisions in the household and to protect their own rights. This resection of women from the workforce is likely to have society-wide ef fects where cultural mores that keep women out of the workplace will be strengthened.

None of these realities are being talked about in Pakistan. This past International Women`s Day, a television channel hosted a conservative female social worker who could not stop talking about how the pandemic was a blessing in disguise because it permitted f amilies to spend quality time with each other. Some in government have also propagated this kind of fantasy because very few, if any, ef forts have been made to collect statistics about exactly how many women are being abused. Nor has there been any work done to provide additional resources to shelters and legal aid cells who are trying to help these women. Instead, the ludicrous fantasy that imagines families living together without any conflict and without women waiting on everyone else all the time, has been nursed and propagated.

Pakistan needs to wake up. The women of the country cannot be expected to shoulder all the burden of housekeeping, childcare, studies and work from home. Vaccinations are now available for the Covid-19 virus but no pre-emptive solution is present for a society and a world that has just been heaping the entire burden of a terrible and catastrophic event on its women. Men must be held answerable for the cruelty and selfishness they have exhibited this past year, attitudes that they have never questioned or considered. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, and indeed that is what has happened to many Pakistani males who stand and watch and live their lives, oblivious to the burdens and abuse they heap on Pakistani women. The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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