**Equal future in pandemic**

[Zile Huma](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/zile-huma/%22%20%5Co%20%22More%20Articles%20by%20Zile%20Huma)

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Every year, on 8th of March, the whole world celebrates International Women Day to create mass awareness about challenges faced by women and to highlight the achievements of successful women. By celebrating International women’s Day, governments reiterate to fulfil their commitments to provide equal opportunities and rights to women and empower them. The theme for International Women’s Day 2021 is “Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 World.

The pandemic created an emergency for the whole world and widened the gap of gender equalities in every parts of the world. Women who are fighting to achieve equal status, became more vulnerable to the negative impacts of COVID-19. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres in early April 2020 said, “horrifying global surge in domestic violence” since the start of the COVID-19 lockdowns. There are several areas where women are badly impacted by COVID-19 lockdown other than domestic violence.

Pakistan is a country that is already confronted by the issues of gender inequality in many areas. According to results of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics census 2017, the total population of Pakistan stands at 207,774,520. The number of men in the country stands at 106,449,322 while the number of women is 101,314,780. The percentage of men, women, and transgenders are 51%, 48.76%, and 0.24% respectively. This huge population of women is facing to multi-dimensional challenges in the period of the pandemic, especially during the lockdown. Starting with the health area, women in Pakistan became more vulnerable to health issues. According to a report launched by the Ministry of Human Rights, Pakistan “Gendered Impacts and Implications of COVID-19” in Pakistan, only 55% of the women have access to adequate healthcare, and only 34% have reported consulting a doctor or a medical professional for health-related problems, providing an evidence that women are less likely to seek and receive medical attention. Traditionally, women in Pakistan are considered responsible for house chores. The lockdown and closure of education institutions increased the burden of work on women and impacted negatively their physical and mental health. The lack of access to medical facilities during pregnancy and other illnesses due to transportation problems and emergency wards full of COVID-19 patients further deteriorated the health of women in Pakistan.

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Similarly, education is equally important for both genders for a healthy society. According to the report released by World Economic Forum in 2019, “less than half of women are literate, compared with 71% of men, while the share of women enrolled is systematically lower than the share of men across primary, secondary and tertiary education” in Pakistan. The financial crises and closure of educational institutions during the COVID-19 also increased the gender gap of education access. The boys are given preference over girls in terms of provision of educational opportunities due to limited resources and considering the boys’ earner of bread and butter of family and girls to get married. Moreover, the lack of facilities like laptops and internet during lockdown to attend online classes reduced the educational opportunities for girls. The increased burden of house chores during the lockdown and the inability of poor families to pay fees of girls’ education due to financial crises in the period of the pandemic, minimized the chance of education access for girls in Pakistan.

Another important area that negatively impacted the female population of Pakistan is economic empowerment. According to a report of the State Bank of Pakistan, women’s formal financial account ownership has increased from 4.8 % in 2014 to 7% in 2017 while men’s account ownership has increased from 21 % in 2014 to 34.6% in 2017. It further states, “It can be inferred that almost 93% of adult women in Pakistan do not have a formal financial account which can show lack of any formal source of income by the majority of female population”. The period of pandemic further reduced the economic empowerment opportunities for women. The lockdown damaged the formal employment and household businesses of women. Similarly, cases of domestic violence and abuse have been reported all around the world. The lockdown increased the cases of aggression, stress, and violence. Women in Pakistan are already victims of gender-based violence and lockdown created more difficulties for females in Pakistan.

To maintain an equal future for both genders during the pandemic, the government of Pakistan took several initiatives for women. Ministry of Human Rights took several steps in 2020 which will help in promising an equal future to women of Pakistan not only during the Pandemic but also in post-pandemic. These steps involve legislations like Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Ordinance 2020 and Domestic Violence (Prevention and Prohibition) Bill, 2019. MOHR also dedicated its helpline to guide and provide legal support to the victims of gender-based violence during the pandemic. Similarly, MOHR also launched several awareness campaigns for women’s rights like an online film festival and celebration of International Women Day. Ehsaas Emergency cash programme is a gender-inclusive programme that saved the poorest families to fall into the poverty trap. According to Special especially focusing on women.

The government needs to implement these initiatives in a true sense to reap their fruits and ensure the equal status of women in society. The lessons learned from the situation of a pandemic can be utilized for future planning to adopt gender balanced policies in emergency situations. We need to include more women in decision-making processes to formulate women inclusive strategies to promise an equal future for women even in the post-COVID-19 world.

*The writer is a graduate of University of Oxford in Public Policy. She tweets @zilehumma\_1*