

# COVID-19 THROUGH THE GENDER LENS

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While COVID-19 continues to ravage through the globe without discrimination, policymakers in Pakistan have yet to address the gendered nature of the pandemic. Governments need to be cognizant of how the global pandemic is expected to disproportionately affect certain groups more than others such as women and girls, especially in the developing world. By looking at the pandemic through the gender lens, this article highlights the specific risks and vulnerabilities girls and women in Pakistan face because of deep-rooted inequalities and traditional gender roles.

Emerging evidence suggests more men than women have contracted the disease in Pakistan. The infected population is comprised of 64 percent men and 36 percent women. However, secondary effects of the pandemic may be much more pronounced for women than men, especially in a developing country like Pakistan. Even though there is limited gender disaggregated data available, this article will attempt to draw attention to how women may be more vulnerable to the measures taken to contain the spread of COVID-19.

It is feared that social distancing, quarantines, and the closure of businesses will have enormous socio-economic consequences for women, some of which are highlighted below.

**Female domestic workers:** According to International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates, there are 8.5 million domestic workers in Pakistan and one of the biggest sources of employment in the informal economy, a majority of whom are women and children. Many domestic workers will be laid off as lockdowns are extended across the country. Compared with men, women are more likely to be casual workers without sick leave/isolation leave work entitlements. If the social distancing measures are extended, these domestic workers may not be paid for the coming months.

**The burden of care and household tasks:** Women and girls already do most of the world's unpaid care work. Women who depend on domestic help will also find themselves bearing much of the burden of housework too. Women are also at a greater risk of exposure to COVID-19 due to their traditional role as caregivers for sick family members. At an individual and household level, men and

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women need to share the caring work involved in surviving the Covid-19 pandemic. This could be facilitated with improved government communications and risk mitigation strategies which actively target this issue.

**Loss of income for home-based female entrepreneurs:** With social distancing measures shutting down businesses, home-based women entrepreneurs at risk of losing their livelihoods may go unnoticed. For example, a number of women supplemented the household income by providing home cooked food to businesses and offices. With businesses closed and delivery services halted, these women are struggling to meet their household needs.

**Female Health-workers:** Women comprise the majority of health care workers are on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19. 67% of the global health workforce is female, according to a 2019 study<sup>2</sup>. According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, there were 108,474 nurses, 40,272 midwives and 19,910 lady health visitors in Pakistan in 2018<sup>3</sup>. While gender disaggregation is not available, it is assumed that these are predominantly women.

**School closures:** Even before social distancing was introduced, women, especially working women, found themselves in a dire situation as schools across the province of Sindh closed down. As responsibility for childcare also fall on women, many had to stay at home from work to care for out of school children. Women in essential jobs, especially those in healthcare, still have to choose between staying at home to care for young children or serve the sick. Looking after children also makes it difficult to continue to be productive on their work from home jobs.

**Risk of increase in domestic violence:** Women and children in self-isolation or in quarantine are also vulnerable to domestic violence. Not all homes are safe, and enforced periods of isolation in the home will put many women at risk. Domestic violence is an indirect impact of coronavirus and more likely in stressed and at risk households.

To ensure that measures taken to mitigate the COVID-19 outbreak do not perpetuate gender and health inequities, it is important that it is recognized that there is a difference of how each gender is

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<sup>2</sup> <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/311314/WHO-HIS-HWF-Gender-WP1-2019.1-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

<sup>3</sup>

<http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files//tables/Health%20Institutions%2C%20Beds%20and%20Personnel%20%28Progressive%29.pdf>

impacted, both directly and indirectly, and gender sensitive measures incorporated in the policy rhetoric. To mitigate disproportionate gendered impacts, it is also important that economic incentives during and post-crisis are not focused only on some sectors of the economy – for instance, construction, which largely employ men compared with the informal sector, which largely employ women. There is also a need to collect gender- and age-disaggregated data for the pandemic to improve our understanding of the gender specific risks and improve our preparedness for other national disasters.