



**International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)**

*A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal*

ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3142 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3143 (Print)

Volume-VII, Issue-VI, November 2021, Page No. 89-104

Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.v7.i6.2021.89-104

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## **Water Crisis and Sustainable Development after COVID-19: The Role of Indian Women in Water Management and Post- pandemic Recovery Policies**

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### **Abstract:**

*Water is one among the foremost precious natural resources. It is impossible to live without water. But water is scarce and having access to water has become a powerful global economic issue that can become one of the main causes of international tension in the near future. Therefore, it is the high time for all of us to rethink our priorities and draw some lessons about water management. But now the world is facing an unprecedented crisis in the form of COVID-19. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic and we have celebrated World Water Day on 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2020 in the midst of it. Along with placing travel restrictions and encouraging social distancing, another most important step to manage the spread of this virus is washing hands. On the one hand, water is necessary to combat COVID-19 and on the other hand, water reserve is becoming scarcer all over the world. India is no exception in this regard. And like most of the societies of the world, in India also the families place the burden of water collection solely on women. Women and girls spend an estimated 200 million hours for collecting water every day. COVID-19 has made the situation more complex for women. Therefore, the present paper is an attempt to analyse the condition of Indian women in the aftermath of COVID-19 and discuss the role played by them in the water management. According to the experts, the impact of COVID-19 will be far reaching and there is no doubt that the impacts of COVID-19 are intensified for women and girls simply because of their sex. Therefore, this paper also endeavors to analyse the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and examine whether the government is ensuring women's equal representation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making or not.*

**Keywords: COVID-19, Economic Impact, Sustainable Development, Women, Water Scarcity, Water Management**

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**Introduction:**

“The earth, the air, the land, and the water are not an inheritance from our forefathers but on loan from our children. So we have to handover to them at least as it was handed over to us.” – Gandhi<sup>i</sup>

According to Leonardo da Vinci, “Water is the driving force of all nature”<sup>ii</sup>. It is beyond any doubt that water is one of the precious resources on the planet if not the most precious one since it is essential for the survival of life on earth. Everyone needs water. Without water no living organism can survive in this planet. But water is not plenty and having access to safe water has become one of the most important global issues. It can also become one of the powerful causes of international tension in the near future. Because of several factors, the demand for water for human consumption is increasing day by day. This crisis of water has recently become a big problem in India alongside other developing countries of the world. The World Water Day is observed on March 22 under the guidance of the United Nations each year to make people realise the importance of water for the survival of every living being. And now the problem of water crisis is going to be amplified throughout the world by an unprecedented crisis in the form of a pandemic called COVID-19. On the one hand, water is necessary to combat COVID-19 and on the other hand, water reserve is becoming scarcer all over the world. When we don’t have water to wash the virus off, it is not possible to fight this deadly pandemic. Therefore, this global COVID-19 outbreak is clearly highlighting the importance of water resources on human and natural environment and other effects of it on socio-economic sectors.

**Water Crisis of the World:** Water is essential for all to live and, therefore, water scarcity hits all living beings including the human beings but women are the worst sufferers of the water crisis. Among the 1.2 billion poor people, two thirds are women. Almost all of them live in water scarce countries and they do not have access to safe and reliable supplies of water for productive and domestic uses.

According to the United Nations World Water Development Report: Leaving no one behind which was launched on 19 March 2019 during the 40th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), because of population growth, socio-economic development and changing consumption patterns, global water use has been increasing by about 1% per year since the 1980s. According to the studies, this demand may increase at a similar rate until 2050.<sup>iii</sup> Around the world more than 2 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water and more than double that number lack access to safe sanitation. As the global population is increasing alarmingly day by day, the demand for water is also predicted to be increased by nearly one-third by 2050.<sup>iv</sup> As the demand for water increases, the water reserve across the world becomes scarce. According to the reports of Environment Agencies, even some parts of a country like England which has a reputation of huge rainfall may face serious water crisis aggravated obviously by the sanitization measures taken by the people to combat COVID-19<sup>v</sup>. At the same time, ground water depletion rate is increasing rapidly throughout the world. It has been found that availability of water in the

arid and semi-arid regions of India, mostly in western India and the Deccan Plateau is already below 1,000 cubic meters per person per year. According to the experts, if current patterns continue, these numbers are going to get worse, and more regions are likely to get affected<sup>vi</sup>. According to the experts, this water scarcity may lead to water war among the countries of the world in future.

**The Impact of COVID-19 on Water Crisis:** The United Nations recognised water and sanitation as a fundamental human right in the year 2010. But still thousands of people around the world do not have access to safe drinking water and proper handwashing facilities. In the meantime, our planet is witnessing the outbreak of a deadly Corona virus called COVID-19. The World Health Organization already declared it a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 and it has already affected 261,494,320 people and taken 5,215,396 lives around the world till 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2021.<sup>vii</sup> According to all health experts around the world, washing hands is one of the effective steps to stop the spread of this deadly virus. But already people of almost all corners of the world were struggling with their access to safe drinking water. They do not have that quantity and quality of water that they need for drinking, bathing, cooking, handwashing and growing their food. All over the world, approximately 844 million people do not have access to clean water.<sup>viii</sup> According to the reports of WHO and the United Nations Children's Fund, almost 40% of people of the world which amounts to approximately three billion live without the opportunity to use soap and water. No doubt, they are the most vulnerable section in the battle against COVID-19.<sup>ix</sup> Among them children and women are always the worst sufferers because they are the most subjugated class of the society. In this critical phase of human history, the COVID-19 virus is pin pointing to the fact that water and sanitation must be available, accessible and affordable to all people of the world to keep our communities safe, healthy and prospering.

On March 24, 2020 some researchers at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom released a study which was undertaken in 63 countries to examine the relation between COVID-19 outbreak and the culture of handwashing. The study reveals that there is a correlation between the size of a country's COVID-19 outbreak and the weakness of its handwashing culture. India has the 10th weakest culture and China, where the pandemic began, has the weakest score of all.<sup>x</sup> According to Ganna Pogrebna of the University of Birmingham, there is a strong correlation between handwashing and spread of the disease and weaker handwashing culture in some developing countries is a big concern. But the study shows that the main problem is elsewhere as the source of this particular culture is not just human psychology or habit, but also objective factors, like water shortages.<sup>xi</sup>

**Water Crisis and Women:** In the previous year the world celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action which was a path breaking conference on gender equality. Since then the concept gender equality has gained momentum throughout the world. But with the spread of COVID-19, according to many experts, even the limited gains with respect to gender equality made in the past decades are at risk of being rolled back. According to the reports of the United Nations of April 2020, this pandemic is going

to make the pre-existing inequalities more prominent, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which will in turn increase the negative impacts of the pandemic.<sup>xii</sup>

It has been found that it is the cultural norm in most water-starved areas of the world that the families place the burden of water collection for daily use solely on women and this responsibility takes most of their time and deprives them of their life. So, it is clear that across the world, this is a gendered burden. Because in almost all societies women largely bear the responsibility of collecting water. Women normally travel long distances not only to fetch drinking water, but also for sanitation purposes. It is estimated that one in three women worldwide risk shame, disease, harassment and even attack because they have to travel long distances for collecting water and for the purpose of sanitation.<sup>xiii</sup>

Globally, 263 million people, most of whom are women, spend minimum 30 minute round trip collecting water. But unfortunately, in the majority of cases the water is not safe for drinking. In 8 out of 10 households where water collection takes half an hour or more, women and girls have to manage this. (WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme, Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene 2017).<sup>xiv</sup>

According to an international charity organization Water Aid which works on health, hygiene and access to safe drinking water, there are many adolescent girls and women around the world who do not have access to toilets. They spend 97 billion hours per annum to find a proper place for their private use. Access to clean water and sanitation facilities is associated with better health outcomes of the women and children. It also contributes to better time management for them which in turn associated with overall economy of that state. Not only that, this facility has a direct relation with the greater safety for women.<sup>xv</sup> Therefore, the goal of every country of the world should be to relieve the women of disproportionate responsibility for water transportation to achieve the goals of sustainable development.

**Water Crisis in India after COVID-19:** In India the availability of water per person per year was 3,000–4,000 cubic metres in 1950. But it came down to 1,545 at the time of the last census in 2011, and since then it has come down further. According to the United Nations, if water availability of a country or a region per head per year is less than 1,700 cubic metres that area is defined as “water-stressed”. When the availability slips below 1,000 cubic metres, the country is labelled as “water scarce.”<sup>xvi</sup> According to government figures cited in a comprehensive report from the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) on India’s water resources and water management system, by 2050, India’s water demand is likely to be increased by 66 percent to 78 percent due to heavy population growth.<sup>xvii</sup> The problem here is that India is an overpopulated country but the sources of water are naturally limited. It leads to recurrent conflicts among the states of India over water sources. In India, caste politics, makes the problem even more complex because in many rural areas the upper-caste people control most of the water sources.

After the outbreak of COVID-19, experts from all over the world as well as governmental machineries are urging people to wash hands with soap and water for minimum 20 seconds, repeatedly throughout the day to stop the spread of the pandemic. But this step is raising a very pertinent question in India and other water scarce counties. If a person washes his/her hands for at least 20-seconds it amounts to at least two liters of water. Therefore, for a family of four persons washing hands 10 times a day each, amounts to 80 liters of water just for handwashing<sup>xviii</sup>. This is actually an unimaginable luxury in a country like India where only a fifth of all households of 1.3 billion have piped running water<sup>xix</sup>. Already thousands of Indians were at risk from various infectious diseases without proper access to safe water even before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 is further worsening this already existing water crisis and its associated diseases in our country. The data till 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2020 shows that five of India's most populous states i.e., Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh account for more than 46% of all COVID-19 cases in the country and because of water scarcity, preventing the spread of this pandemic becomes a challenge to these states.<sup>xx</sup> According to a survey by the Jadavpur University of Kolkata, the outbreak of COVID-19 has increased the demand for water in the state to a large extent. Only in the city of Kolkata the demand for water increased to almost 13.5 million litres and this figure clearly shows that it is more than double the usage before the outbreak of this pandemic<sup>xxi</sup>.

**Condition of Women in India in the aftermath of COVID-19:** In India particularly in rural areas, collecting water is predominantly a woman's job. Female members of the families are considered their family's provider for an increasingly valuable material called water.<sup>xxii</sup> Ranjana Kumari, who is the director of advocacy Centre for Social Research, said women bear the physical strain of collecting water. At the same time they also suffer from the emotional and psychological stresses because they have to manage everyday with little water and maintain menstrual hygiene.<sup>xxiii</sup>

A group of public health researchers, led by Dr. Kelly K. Baker of the University Of Iowa, College of Public Health had undertaken a study on 3,952 adolescent girls and women between September 2013 and March 2014 in two rural districts of Odisha, namely Khorda and Sundargarh to understand whether there is a relation between hygiene practices and self-reported Reproductive tract infections (henceforth, RTI) symptoms. According to the study, the women have to go a long way to fetch water. This forces them to compromise on hygiene and this also increases the risk of them becoming sick. Thus, this study concludes that water and sanitation access are two important determinants of RTI risk in women and therefore global efforts to improve women's water and latrine coverage may reduce the percentage of RTIs among the most vulnerable women worldwide.<sup>xxiv</sup> In India, women spend about 150 million work days per annum collecting and carrying water. This amounts to a national loss of income of Rs. 1,000 crore or \$160 million<sup>xxv</sup> and, therefore, it is a great loss not only for these women who spend their days fetching and collecting water but also a huge national loss. After the outbreak of pandemic COVID-19, the situation for

women has become more and more sensitive. This global pandemic is going to unmask the global inequalities to a large extent.

**The Role of the Indian Government as well as the Women of Our Country in Water Management before and after COVID-19:** A pandemic increases and magnifies all the problems of human beings. It increases all types of inequalities and these inequalities not only adversely affect the direct sufferers but all the development of the human fraternity. COVID-19 pandemic has created a global crisis and its impact on all aspects of human life is entirely new and unparalleled in the history of mankind. Therefore, all the governments of the world must be innovative and practical while selecting the recovery plans.

Many parts of India has been suffering from water scarcity long before the outbreak of COVID-19 and it requires actions both at the grass root and at the national levels. Therefore, already the Indian governments have been adopting various policies to deal with this problem of water crisis.

Abhishek Varier, member of an NGO called Visakha Jilla Nava Nirman Samithi which is funded by Arghyam and Frank Water had undertaken a survey and reached a conclusion that there is a direct relationship between increase in school enrolment rates and improvement in access to safe drinking water. Sheetal Sekhri, Associate Professor of the Department of Economics in the University of Virginia, in a 2013 research paper analysed the literacy levels in villages in Uttar Pradesh and found that female literacy rates were higher in those villages which are closer to water sources.<sup>xxvi</sup>

NITI Aayog, in its June 2018 Report, clearly declares that India is facing one of its worst water crises ever with nearly 600 million people – half of India’s overall population – facing high to extreme water stress. According to the reports of Central Water Commission, by 2050 the population of India will reach to almost 1.66 billion. Therefore, the annual food requirement in the country will exceed 250 million tons by 2050 which means additional demand for water.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Government of India has already been trying to take necessary steps to face water crisis and achieve the goal to access drinking water facilities by all the residents of the country. Keeping this objective in mind, Government had already merged ministries of water resources and drinking water and sanitation. The resultant Ministry is Jal Shakti. The central government has the intention to utilise this Department as a single umbrella dealing with different issues related to water like inter-state and international water disputes, drinking water availability, Namai Ganga programme, cleaning of water of the Ganga and its tributaries, monitoring the flow of rivers, better management and conservation of water, various pollutions etc.<sup>xxviii</sup>

On July 1, 2019 the central government launched the Jal Shakti Abhiyan. The objective of this programme is water conservation and water security. The emphasis of this programme is on low water containing and drought prone districts and blocks.<sup>xxix</sup> The main objective of ATAL JAL is to strengthen the infrastructure for participatory groundwater

management and to change the behaviour of the community for sustainable groundwater resource management in seven States, viz. Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Gujarat. Nearly 8350 Gram Panchayats in 78 districts in these States are expected to get benefit from these programmes. ATAL JAL is designed to promote panchayat led ground water management.<sup>xxx</sup> According to the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, central government officials will visit and work with district and ground level administration in 1,592 drought prone blocks in 256 districts across India to guarantee five important water conservation interventions. These interventions are – rainwater harvesting and conservation, renovation of conservative and other water bodies or tanks, reuse, bore-well maintenance, development of watershed and afforestation.<sup>xxxi</sup>

The assigned duties of Central Water Commission are to initiate, coordinate and broaden the schemes for conservation, control and utilisation of water resources throughout the country. The members of the Commission have to work in consultation with the state governments concerned. The purposes of their work are controlling floods, irrigation, and drinking water supply and water power development.<sup>xxxii</sup>

It is an undeniable fact that around 5 per cent of health loss is due to unsafe water, sanitation, and hand-washing practices, which the government is trying to solve through the Swachh Bharat Mission.<sup>xxxiii</sup> All these programmes of water conservation have become much more significant in the aftermath of COVID-19 which is going to worsen the water reserve of our country.

It is a proven fact that there is a clear link between improvement in water supply and women empowerment. Without empowering the women, no society or country can achieve progress or sustainable development. That is why governments have been trying to include women in different socio-economic development polices including water management. The National Policy for Women, 2016 suggested to involve and train women for proper conservation and utilisation of water. Through this Policy the Government of India has been trying to ensure active participation of women and girls in various stages of water management.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The concept of Water Cadre (Jal Mitra) through Jal Saheli (Women Water Worrier) and Pani Panchayat (Water Panchayat) was introduced by ‘Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan’ under the project named “Establishing Women’s First Right to Water Resources” in 3 districts (Jalaun, Hameerpur and Lalitpur) of Bundelkhand region in India<sup>xxxv</sup>. The objectives of the Project are to promote women’s role in water-livelihood linkages through decentralisation and community water management, to engage and strengthen the participatory and decision-making processes in Panchayati Raj Institutions through women advocacy groups and by promoting women’s leadership and to ensure drinking water and food security and strengthening their socio-economic and political status. This Project became a huge success. The Jal Sahelis and Pani Panchayat of these districts have been consistently addressing the issues of water scarcity, drought and water conservation. They are trying to revive traditional water bodies and supervising overall water management of

the villages. The village-women, who have chosen to become Jal Sahelis, are also engaged in preserving the Hand Pumps to solve the problem of drinking water in water scarce villages. They are also regularly teaching the villagers regarding effective water management through pond renovation, checking dams etc. The women of the villages are directly involved in the planning, management and distribution of water through water tankers in different villages. It is quite clear from the above example that women are always showing the way out when they are being involved in the water management.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The role of women have become more critical after COVID-19. Even the United Nations is urging the governments of all countries to include them in all national responses policies if they are to get best results.

Indian governments, both central and states, have been adopting various policies to deal with water scarcity even before the outbreak of COVID-19 and this pandemic may be considered as an opportunity for the government as well as other nongovernmental organisations to grab the moment to go ahead with much more effective measures to expand the access to water services across the country. Recently the Supreme Court of India issued an order for a writ petition on need for clean and safe water. Following the Supreme Court order, the Health Ministry of India acknowledged that the demand for water has increased after the outbreak of COVID-19 but, according to the Reports, almost half of the Indian households does not have exclusive access to drinking water and one-fourth of Indian households can access the water only through public sources. But in this scenario, accessing water from public sources does not go well with social distancing norms. That is why the Health Ministry realised the need to increase the supply hour to ensure proper social distancing and to mitigate the increased demand for water.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Any serious effort towards water management within India should focus on the management of agricultural irrigation also.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The residents of Kukkavu area of Belthangady town in Dakshina Kannada district were facing water shortage amid the coronavirus lockdown and this scarcity of water has forced school-going children there to dig a well with their hands. A group of five students managed to dig a 12 feet well within four days.<sup>xxxix</sup> This incident is a very good example of community participation.

### **Participation of Women in COVID-19 Response Planning and Decision-Making:**

Principle 3 of the Dublin Principles 1992 has already recognised the important role of women which they play in the provision, management and safeguarding of water all over the world.<sup>xl</sup>

This pandemic called COVID-19 is not at all gendered, but the main problem with this is that it is amplifying gender inequality in many parts of the world including India and states' response to it is not always very satisfactory. The United Nations can help the countries by handing over gender analysis and sex-disaggregated data including those related to COVID-19 response programmes and policies. The United Nations can also advise the governments on what measures can be implemented with low transaction costs, and on how to target

programmes to make income opportunities for women whose financial condition has been badly affected by COVID-19 quarantine and lockdown policies<sup>xli</sup>.

According to the living paper written by Ugo Gentilini and others on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2020, till then, a total of 106 countries have introduced or adopted social protection and job security programmes in response to COVID-19.<sup>xlii</sup> Within these social assistance programmes cash transfer schemes are most popular. 71 countries were already continuing 124 such schemes and among them 36 countries have already started 54 new initiatives specifically as COVID-19 response.<sup>xliii</sup> Indian government gave Rs1000 to approximately 35 Million beneficiaries under the National Social Assistance Program (NSAP) for elderly, widows and disabled receiving social pensions. The Central Government had also transferred cash of Rs 500/- for 3 months from April to June to 200 million women with a Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana account. Apart from these initiatives, all the state governments have also started several welfare schemes for COVID-19 affected people including women.

But these recovery policies should not be one-sided. According to the data provided by the Government of India, between April and June, 2020, the government released three tranches of more than Rs 10,300 crore each to be directed to about 200 million women. But it has been found from the official records that of the Rs 10,300 crore deposited in Jan Dhan accounts in April and May, on average, only Rs 3,000 to Rs 4,000 crore was withdrawn each month.<sup>xliiv</sup> Unfortunately, a large number of women could not withdraw the money from their account because of many factors like account dormancy due to infrequent usage and limited access to banks in rural areas of India. To solve these problems Government must take proper administrative and financial measures so that the benefits can be accessed by the target groups. Experts suggest that the Government must relax the documentation procedure of the banks and provide direct cash benefits to the beneficiaries and, at the same time, women should be included in all COVID-19 social protection policies as they are the worst sufferers in every respect. Even the United Nations is also advising all the countries to ensure women's equal representation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making processes with their male counterparts. According to various expert reports including United Nations, women will be the worst hit section of the society by this global pandemic but at the same time they are going to be the backbone of COVID-19 recovery programmes. They should also be involved in the water management strategies. Their traditional roles and duties towards their households and society will guarantee the success of these policies and programmes of water management.

It is a fact that many regions of India suffer from water shortage. But at the same time, we cannot deny that many Indians especially villagers have a laid-back attitude towards handwashing. According to the experts, handwashing is a must to stop the COVID-19 virus and we have already discussed that there is a correlation between weakness of handwashing culture and spread of this deadly virus. But in many regions of India the culture of lack of hand hygiene makes them ill-protected against various communicable diseases including COVID-19. Change of culture is not possible by only passing the laws. The change must come from within the society and here women can take a lead role in making hand hygiene

potentially a part of a family's behaviour. For getting the help of women, government must involve them in water management programmes as women are the ones who collect water for the entire family.

One of the best examples of it is Pipara village in the parched Bundelkhand region which is normally known as water- starved terrain now stands out for its uninterrupted water supply. The secret behind this lies in the fact that the village has its women to thank for it<sup>xlv</sup>. Women in the Bundelkhand region have to spend almost four to five hours every day to secure drinking water. But villagers of Pipara from Niwadi block of Tikamgarh district in Madhya Pradesh managed their water resources by themselves and have totally changed the water situation in their village. They actually involved the village women in the management of water supply and the result is 100% success.<sup>xlvi</sup>

The effort of the women of Pipara village led by Sheena Vishwakarma, a woman in her 50s from Pipara and the Women Self Help Group Ram Raja Tejasvini Swayam Sahayata Samuha demonstrated that when every part of the society work together with the government and when women can get the opportunity to work for the wellbeing of a community, it is not impossible to overcome hurdles.

**The Effect of COVID-19 on Sustainable Development:** Amidst all the negative impacts of COVID-19, some researchers are also focusing on the positive impact of it on environment especially on water crisis. Due to the lockdown to combat COVID-19, many factories, offices, hotels, restaurants, servicing centres and educational institutions remained closed for a long time. Thus the water demand was decreased. Moreover, it has been found that because of the stoppage of industrial pollutants and industrial waste due to lockdown, water quality of many rivers has been improved. Global Water Leaders Group had undertaken a survey in this regard and according to them, industrial water demand fell by an average of 27% because of the lockdowns due to COVID-19<sup>xlvii</sup>. Therefore, it can be said that ironically, this pandemic has given the earth's biosphere some life-support. Actually the outbreak of COVID-19 and the lockdowns as its antidote are teaching us that the natural world can solve its own problems within a very short period of time, if left alone by us. But, according to many experts, this is a very temporary phase.

Apart from its effect on water crisis, COVID-19 has already started to show its negative effects on other sectors and women are always at the receiving end. As a result of this pandemic health services in many countries have become totally saturated. The various reports from COVID-19 affected countries across the world reveal that more men are becoming the victims of this virus, but the number of casualties do not present before us an accurate picture of the gendered impact of COVID-19. According to the study of the United Nations (UN) Women, COVID-19 infects both men and women almost the same way<sup>xlviii</sup>. Some studies across the world also suggest that the mortality rate of men due to COVID-19 is higher than women. But, according to S.V. Subramanian, Professor of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, if we only focus on the available data, we may overlook the risks faced by women.<sup>xlix</sup> Experts are

apprehending that ultimately the general health of women is going to be affected through the reallocation of resources and priorities, including sexual and reproductive health services. While discussing the scenario of India, Professor Subramanian is of the opinion that most of the Indian women have poor physical fitness and respiratory health because of indoor air pollution and gendered social structure. According to the National Family Health Survey (2015-16) report, 53.1% Indian women in the age group of 15-49 years is anaemic and poor nutritional status is one of the key factors of poor immunity which increases the chances of succumbing to various diseases including COVID-19<sup>i</sup>.

Apart from its direct consequences on health sector, many human rights activists are showing in their reports that gender-based violence has been increased at an exceptional rate under the lockdown and social isolation situations which is aggravated by economic and social stresses. iCall<sup>li</sup> is a mental health helpline which works for the mental wellbeing of individuals in India. Aparna Joshi, the Project Director of this organisation described this current situation “a brewing pot” as the frustrated and unemployed men are venting their anger and frustration on the women of their family through physical, verbal and sexual assault<sup>lii</sup>.

The global economy is going to face an unparalleled downturn in the near future. According to the calculation of International Labour Organization, because of COVID-19 more than 195 million jobs could be eliminated globally and majority of those job sectors are predominated by women throughout the world.<sup>liii</sup> This data is clearly showing the distressing condition of women across the world. Moreover, most of the women in almost all countries of the world work in the informal sectors and it has been found that economic impacts of COVID-19 will be felt especially by women and girls who mostly work in informal and unpaid sectors and hold insecure jobs. The effects of COVID-19 on economic sector will be more prominent in developing countries like India, where gender inequality always remains a huge challenge. International Labour Organization estimates that about 400 million people of our country are in the danger of going under poverty line.<sup>liv</sup> Almost 90% of India’s workforce are employed in the informal sectors and they will suffer the most. Not only India, according to the studies, other countries in Southeast Asia including Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal are also facing the gendered concerns of this pandemic. Therefore, it has been rightly predicted by many experts that the socio-economic and health consequences of COVID-19 will be more devastating for women. Therefore, it is undeniable that COVID-19 has a gendered impact also. It has been found that the Ebola virus has already showed that lockdowns reduce women’s economic activities and increase poverty rates among them.<sup>lv</sup> Past experiences of various calamities and various reports are easily forecasting the fact that the impacts of COVID-19 on global economic depression will make it harder for women to earn their livelihood and, according to the United Nations Report, ‘The Impact of COVID-19 on Women’, published in April 2020, these impacts will be faced more by women who are already living in poverty. Therefore, these gendered concerns should receive attention from governmental and international organisations.

Governments of COVID-19 affected countries have to take several measures to recover from the negative impacts of it and while designing fiscal stimulus packages and social assistance programmes, governments must keep in mind the goal of gender equality. Governments and International Community should also keep in mind the fact that women and girls are not at all a homogeneous group. They are from varied backgrounds, they have different types of demands and interests and they also face multiple forms of discrimination. Therefore, social assistance and empowerment programmes should also cater to the different needs of various sections of the society especially the women.

**Conclusion:** COVID-19 is showing the depth of human, economic, and social sufferings. This worst health crisis of our generation is now challenging the modern civilization to a great extent. We have to go a long way to heal this planet and to achieve the goals of sustainable development including access to safe drinking water. Recently, the studies of International Finance Corporation have drawn a clear conclusion that this pandemic called COVID-19 has reinforced the importance of access to safe and reliable water for all the people of the world<sup>lvi</sup>. And to achieve these goals all the stakeholders should work hand in hand. Every corner of the society should help the government in this respect. In India governments have already taken several socio-economic recovery measures but these measures are not wide enough. Implementation of laws, policies and programmes should be backed by political will and social initiatives. It is very important to expand the right of every citizen to access safe drinking water, clean air and primary health care services which will in turn improve life expectancy and physical fitness of the people. Government must include ordinary citizens especially women in the water management and other social security programmes as they are always the worst sufferers of deadly pandemic, water scarcity and its associated socio-economic impacts. Not only individual woman, but different types of women's organisations must also be involved in all the decision-making processes of recovery programmes in the aftermath of COVID-19 to get the best results. Governments must use women's networks and organisations, civil society and non-governmental organisations, including microfinance and savings groups to get maximum benefits. But we have to remember that governments alone cannot stop the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic impacts. Actually, it requires a partnership approach at all levels. Governments must place the women at the centre of sustainable development programmes and it will bring about a speedy recovery and finally we may be back on our way to achieve sustainable development. We may hope it will not be far off when our planet will be free from this deadly pandemic and its evil effects and it is our belief that in this period of crisis governments, individuals and international organisations will be capable enough for strong and rapid action to support a more speedy recovery of our mother earth to rebuild more uniform, comprehensive, strong and sustainable societies in the face of this overarching challenge.

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