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Introduction to Journal of International Women's Studies Special Issue COVID-19: The Impact on Women and Girls Around the World

By Fikresus Fikrejesus Amahazion¹

Introduction

While disasters can harm all, they do not impact or affect all people equally or in the same ways. In particular, when societies are confronted by disease outbreaks, emergencies, conflicts, and humanitarian or other crises, women and girls are affected differently than men and boys (Alam and Rahman 2014; Cao and Kamel 2011; Ginige, Amaratunga, and Haigh 2009). Notably, a considerable body of work from various settings around the world has shown that disasters, and their subsequent variegated impact, are often more deadly for women than for men (Oxfam 2004; Peterson 1997). For example, following the devastating 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh, female mortality was higher than male in most age groups (Ikeda 1995), while in a study of disaster strength and the gender gap in life expectancy in a sample of 141 countries over the period from 1981 to 2002, it was found that natural disasters lower the life expectancy of women more than that of men (Neumayer and Plumper 2007).

Women and girls in post-disaster and conflict settings are also often vulnerable to trafficking, exploitation, sexual violence or rape, and far more likely to be out of school (Alston 2013; Farhoudian et al. 2006; Jewkes 2007; Jones et al. 2014; UN OHCA 2019). Additionally, women's sexual and reproductive health and needs may be neglected, leading to unplanned pregnancies, a rise in maternal mortality, or increases in the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, while overcrowding, lack of security, and poor sanitary conditions in temporary shelters, informal settlements, and displacement camps can pose an array of physical and mental health risks (Bradshaw and Fordham 2014; Duramy 2011; IFRC 2010; Toole 1997).

Importantly, when large-scale crises and disasters occur, preexisting gender-based inequalities, barriers, vulnerabilities, and discrimination faced by women and girls are frequently exacerbated, intensified, or increased (Demetriades and Esplen 2008; Morrow and Peacock 1997). For instance, following disasters, women's working conditions within the household and paid workplace may significantly deteriorate, particularly as a result of a lack of childcare and increased work and family conflicts (Enarson 2000). In a longitudinal analysis of gender-related vulnerability and resilience in a small coastal community following the 2010 earthquake and tsunami in Chile, researchers found that patriarchal relations imposed during the emergency and recovery period intensified long existing patterns of aggression (Moreno and Shaw 2018). Similarly, a study of the challenges confronted by girls and women following the 2012 twin earthquakes that struck eastern Iran revealed that many girls were subjected to forced and underage marriages, partly driven by poverty (Sohrabizadeh et al. 2017).

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What is more, since women and girls are more likely to experience poverty, be heavily constrained by sociocultural norms, and have less socioeconomic power, control over resources, or access to education and information than men and boys, it may be considerably more difficult for them to adequately prepare for, cope with, resist, or recover from disasters. During the December 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, for instance, a key contributing factor to the fact that many more women died than men was that men were more likely to be able to swim or climb trees, while women also lost precious evacuation time trying to look after children and other relatives (Oxfam 2005). In the same way, part of the reason that approximately 90% of the victims of the devastating 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh were women and girls was because prevailing socio-cultural norms restricted their mobility and access to information (Ikeda 1995).

Impact of COVID-19 on Women and Girls around the World

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a recently discovered coronavirus. On 31 December 2019, Chinese media reported for the first time on an outbreak of viral pneumonia in the city of Wuhan. Several months later, in early March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO 2020). Since its emergence, the pandemic has been one of the greatest global crises in decades; to date, over one hundred million cases have been confirmed in countries across the globe, several million people have died, and the livelihoods of billions have been greatly affected.

However, although a considerable amount of coverage and attention have been dedicated to exploring the multifaceted effects of the global crisis, such as health-related outcomes, economic losses, psychosocial harms, and political implications, comparatively little focus has been directed to examining the particular impact of the pandemic on women and girls. Accordingly, this special issue is specifically dedicated to critically interrogating and deeply examining how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted women and girls around the world.

Comprising nine articles that cover a range of topics within various countries, this special issue is significant for a number of different reasons. For one, it offers key, timely insights and contributes to increasing awareness and understanding of an important, albeit hitherto underexplored, aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic: the experience of girls and women. Notably, as well, better addressing and responding to the harmful, negative impacts experienced by women and girls in crises and disasters fundamentally requires greater recognition and deeper understanding of the vulnerabilities, challenges, and issues that they face. The articles within this special issue, both individually and as a broader, general collective, represent a positive step in that direction. Finally, with contributions from experienced international scholars from a range of fields and disciplines, and with a focus on an array of countries, the present collection of articles provides a wide-ranging, broad-based, interdisciplinary exploration and perspective of a pressing issue.

In the first article, entitled “Diffusion of #NiUnaMenos in Latin America: Social Protests Amid a Pandemic,” Adriana Piatti-Crocker utilizes archival documentation, digital platforms, and reports to explore the diffusion of #NiUnaMenos [“Not One (woman) Less”] in Latin America, a social movement conceived five years ago in Argentina to protest against misogynist violence. Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the #NiUnaMenos movement in contrasting ways. As the virus spread, there was recognition that countermeasures were exacerbating gender-based violence and a new urgency was added to the problem. At the same time, however, the pandemic also raised new challenges for activists and their massive street demonstrations, which

were no longer safe and often banned or limited by governments. In response, some women's groups organized virtual protests, but with only mixed effects. Overall, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, #NiUnaMenos has provided women with an important platform to demand greater gender equity and an end to violence.

In "Virus, Violence and [In]Visible Women: #LockDownMeinLockUp and Embodied Resistance During COVID-19", Ishani Mukherjee draws upon the #LockDownMeinLockUp visual campaign against domestic and gender-based violence in India to explore how gender, body, power, affect, celebrity, performance, and (in)justice are framed by digital media in the context of an unprecedented global health crisis. Conducting an inductive thematic analysis of 1,624 Instagram images related to the #LockDownMeinLockUp campaign, celebrity selfies, and digital posters, Mukherjee finds four themes relating to representations of and interventions against domestic violence against Indian women during the pandemic and that the digital campaign and its resistance images surface as tools of localized activism. While the campaign achieved some short-term successes, its potential long-term impacts are contingent on a number of different factors.

Soma Dey, Sanzida Akhter, and Tasnim Nowshin Fariha's important study, "Diminishing Inequalities? A Study on Reconstituted Gender Relations in Bangladeshi Households During the COVID-19 Crisis", investigates the gendered impact of the pandemic in Bangladesh. Through analyzing data gathered from online questionnaires and in-depth interviews, the authors find that the pandemic has generated a condition for challenging gender inequality by diminishing the public-private divide and expanding the horizon of sharing between women and men. However, although some women have been able to broaden life choices and positively change unequal relationships with spouses, other women have continued to face various inequalities.

In "Case Study: Effects of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions on eight Mongolian single mothers", Khongorzul Amarsanaa, József Rácz, and Mónika Kovács examine single mothers' experiences during the lockdown in Mongolia. Semi-structured interviews with eight single mothers reveal that the pandemic had significant psychological consequences, including uncertainty, worry, anxiety, insecurity, and frustration. Additionally, the lockdown led to the loss of income, unemployment, and an increased household workload. However, several positive psychological and other outcomes were identified, such as increased creativity, newly-acquired life skills, community care, and a reminder of values.

Rabia Ali and Asma Khalid's article, "COVID-19 and Domestic Violence in Pakistan: An Analysis of Media Perspective", attempts to understand the prevalence of domestic violence during the lockdown period in Pakistan. Through a summative qualitative content analysis of 20 articles focused on domestic violence published in three national Pakistani newspapers, Ali and Khalid find that the power and control of perpetrators over women has increased and that the home has become a dangerous space where women are insecure and unsafe. While domestic violence is regarded as a serious issue and is condemned, government attempts to address it during the lockdown are considered inadequate and largely symbolic.

In their thought-provoking article, "The Role of Turkish Metropolitan Municipalities on Combatting Violence against Women within the Context of Legal Framework", Ayşe Güneş and Feriştah Yılmaz investigate the policies implemented by metropolitan municipalities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey aiming to reduce violence against women. Based on an analysis of government data from metropolitan municipalities, municipal council meeting records, and strategic plans, the study offers some intriguing findings. In particular, Yılmaz and Güneş find that

the efforts to combat violence against women are unsatisfactory, as well as that cooperation between these municipalities and central government should be strengthened.

Hazel Biana and Rosallia Domingo's article, "Lesbian Single Parents: Reviewing Philippine COVID-19 Policies", considers government policy and explores how the pandemic may have magnified or exacerbated existing inequalities experienced by single lesbian parents in the Philippines. The authors' analysis reveals how while single parents generally tend to face considerable challenges, such as combining employment and household duties, inadequate income and social security, a lack of childcare support, and financial debt, lesbian single parents must also contend with a spate of other serious issues and difficulties posed by a heterosexist and homophobic society.

Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi's article, "Survival Strategies of HIV-Positive Transgender Women During the Covid-19 Lockdown in a South African Rural Community", examines the experiences and survival strategies of HIV positive transgender women in a rural South African community during the COVID-19 lockdown. Interviews with transgender women identify several issues they were confronted by during the lockdown, including homelessness, hunger, and a lack of support. In response, some were forced to engage in different risky behaviors to survive.

Finally, in the article, "Feminist Knowledge, Self-Empowerment and Sisterhood, and Safe Space: How the 'Perempuan Berkisah' Community Group Empowers Indonesian Women in the Pandemic Era", Rouli Esther Pasaribu examines how the Perempuan Berkisah community has empowered Indonesian women during the pandemic. The findings from content analysis of the community's Instagram account and interviews with community members reveal an interesting narrative of women's empowerment, which features several notable prominent elements. Interestingly, Pasaribu interprets these findings in terms of neoliberal values and suggests that they may have implications for efforts to establish a gender-equal society.

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