

Gendering covid-19-the impact of pandemic on women in Kerala

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Abstract: COVID 19 has stuck all walks of life in the world. People forced to confine themselves with in four walls of their home in order to contain the unprecedented spread of this pandemic. Women, irrespective of time, education, status or circumstances, always bear the major burden of managing their households and supporting the family members. This paper analyses how COVID 19 has affected psychological and physiological well being of women in Kerala .The study was conducted among women in Kerala. Stratified random sampling was used to selection of the sample for the study. Structured questionnaire was used for data collection.

Key Words: COVID 19, women employees, work from home, job related factors, Work Life Balance, Emotional wellbeing.

1. INTRODUCTION:

“Children move stones with their feet. Men move rocks with their hands. Women move mountains with their hearts.”— **Matshona Dhlwayo**

The unprecedented situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought tremendous changes in all realms of life; especially in the ways of human interactions and social living. People are forced to confine themselves to the four walls of their houses, bringing office schools etc. Women being the primary caregivers of a family and playing multiple roles, have seen themselves entering an unfamiliar terrain. They are designated with additional responsibilities and are forced to stretch themselves to support the emotional to physiological needs of the family members, missing out their personal space, quality time for self-care and emotional wellbeing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Women, irrespective of time, education, status or circumstances, always bear the major burden of managing their households and supporting the family members. Many studies have been conducted at national and global level about the plight and problems of women during the pandemic. The studies found a variety of issues faced by women, like domestic violence, depression, unexpected pregnancies, work-life balance complications, and worries about the children, financial predicaments, job insecurities, extensive workload and couple disputes.

Hamadani et.al. (2020), conducted an interrupted time series study (May 19 – June 18), among 3016 mothers in Bangladesh and identified a set of momentous issues ranging from economic insecurities to intimate partner violence faced by woman. Czymara (2020), analysed the gender inequality issues faced by women in Germany using mixed research approach, via 1100 reports. The study found differences in the priorities and psychological states of men and women. Women are more concerned about matters like child care, social contacts and requirements of the family, whereas men are concerned about economy, paid work and society. Nigam (2020), analysed the socio-economic consequences of pandemic on women in India and identified that lockdown leads to women loosing autonomy over the household and have become more susceptible to violence and abuse.

3. METHODOLOGY:

The study was conducted among women in Kerala. Stratified random sampling was used to selection of the sample for the study. In the first stage the district level division of the state was made. From each district sample was selected based on the total population via proportional allocation. Structured questionnaire was used for data collection, which consisted of questions about the demographic factors, job related issues, partner issues, worries about children, recognition issues, psychological wellbeing and social welfare. The questionnaire was circulated through, email, personal contacts and digital media. Incomplete and faulty questionnaires were eliminated during editing of data editing. 706 duly filled questionnaires were selected for the analysis. The collected data was analysed using frequency and percentage. The analysis was done separately for different groups based on their specific demographic details like, married, unmarried, divorced, employed, unemployed etc.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS:

The data analysis is done using percentage and frequencies. The first set of data describes the demographic profile of the respondents.

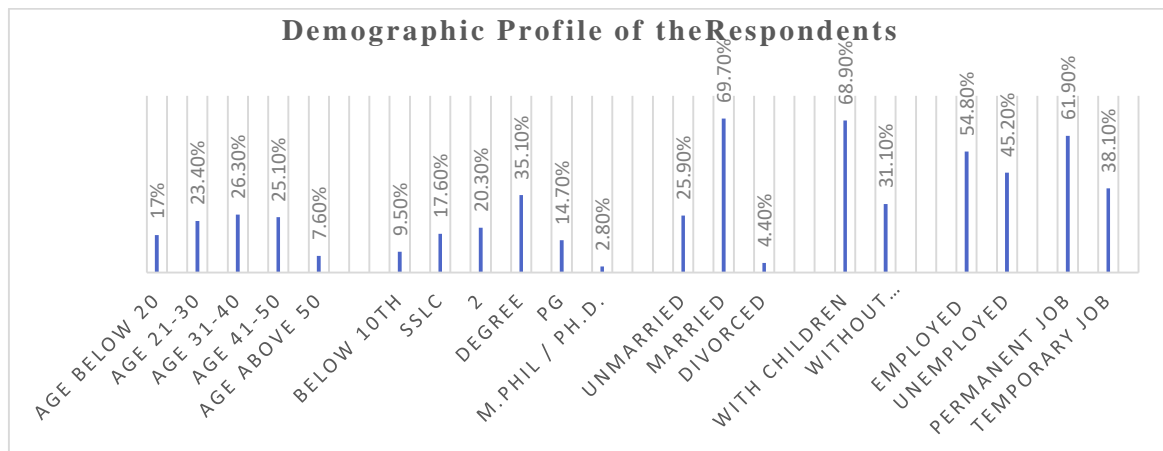


Figure 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

As given in figure 1, it can be seen that more than 70% of the respondents belongs to the middle age group of 20 to 50, who are responsible for the household activities and 7% is above 50 and 17% is below 20 years of age. Second factor is the educational qualification, wherein except the 9.5% of respondents all others are above the 10th qualification and majority holds a graduation or post-graduation. The employment profile of the respondents shows that, more than 50% are permanently employed. Majority of the respondents (70%) are married and 68.9% respondents have children. A critical analysis of the demographic profile of the respondents, shows that the data was collected can very well portray the opinions of the women population of the state. The findings of the study start on a bunch of positive notes. As per the analysed data, 68% of the respondents expressed happiness and satisfaction about the support from family, especially from their partners. The respondents agreed that, they receive help from the other family members in handling the additional responsibilities that came as part of the special situation created by the pandemic. Another trend, which was fairly positives, is that the occurrences of negative incidents like domestic violence, lack of social contacts and unplanned pregnancies is limited to small numbers.

4.1. Job and Job related issues:

The study found that the families faced serious problems because of the job related issues like, the women lost their job, salary was reduced or withheld, job was temporarily stopped, the partner lost the job and problems with conveyance to the job location. Figure 2, gives a brief understanding of the percentage of women facing different job related issues.

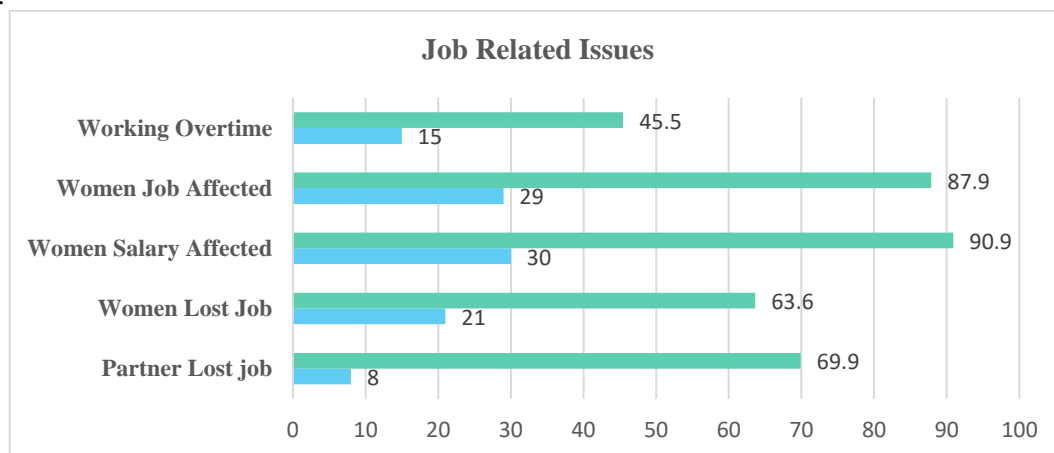


Figure 2: Job Related Issues

Looking at the percentages, 87.9% women has problems with their jobs, 90.9% of them has their salary altered, either deducted or withheld and 63.6% lost their jobs. Only 17% started new ventures, though not on a full-fledged way. Among the married women, 69.9% of their partners lost their jobs. This issue related to the employment

of the bread winners of the families is a clear indication of the financial insecurities and difficulties that must have followed.

4.2. Concern and worry about children

One of the key findings of the study is the concern and worry of the parents about their children. The changes in the teaching and learning system, with the beginning of online classes have influenced the children on manifold intensities. First, the introduction of online education has restricted the children from their personal interactions and their joyful fellowships, which has taken a toll on their psychological comfort. Further to that, the fear of infection, financial difficulties, uncertainties about the future and social isolation has also negatively influenced the children, creating solemn emotional burden. The mothers under study expressed serious concerns about the emotional wellbeing and happiness of their children as well as about their inability to provide satisfactory support. The second change that came as part of online education was the pressure on parents to give the children free access to mobile phones, computers and internet. Since the possibilities of face to face interactions with friends became less, the number of virtual friends has increased, bringing in wrong guidance, imprudent ideologies, dangerous influences and fake relationships. In addition to that, the sudden but full-fledged exposure to digital media has resulted in the exploitation of the facilities by the children and detrimental usage of technology. In most of the cases, the parents fails to have control over their children’s usage of digital media, because of lack of awareness, fear of negative response from children and the imperative excuse essentialness of digital media for learning.

4.3. Recurring Patterns:

Apart from the analysis of the individual factors, few patterns of relationship between contributory variables were also identified. The patterns that tend to recur are given below:

4.4. Women’s Employment Issues and their Emotional Well being:

It may be noted that, among the married women under study, 85.2% comes under self-employed, permanently employed or temporarily employed. Among them 87.7% of the women faces job related issue (44% lose their job and 56% salary was reduced or withheld). Among the unmarried women and divorced women, 21.8% and 58% respectively are employed. Among the two groups, 80% of the divorced women’s job was affected by the pandemic and 70% of the unmarried women’s job was affected by the pandemic.

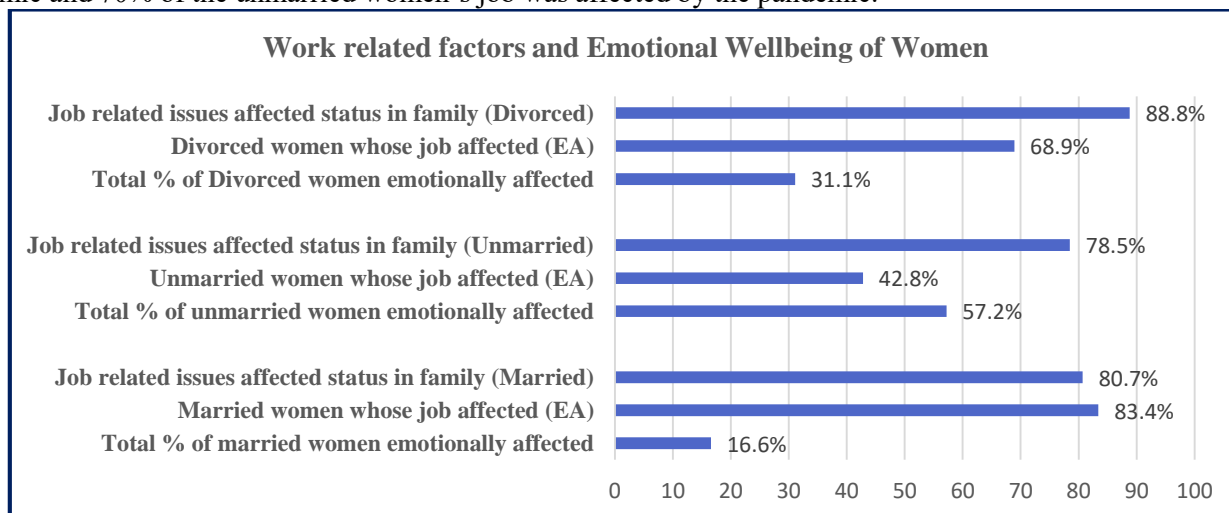


Figure 3: Work related factors and emotional wellbeing of women

Above figure gives a categorised representation of the influence of employment issues on the emotional wellbeing of the women. The chart also portrays how the job related issues affected their personal status in the families. A similar pattern was identified for the married and unmarried women in the relationship between emotional wellbeing and employment issues. Among the total number of married women who were emotionally affected, 83.4% was facing job related issues. In the case of emotionally affected divorced women, 68.9% was facing job threats. But in the case of unmarried women, the impact pattern was not accurately followed. Among the emotionally affected unmarried women, 42.8% was only facing job related issues. The difference in the patterns of the relationship stated may be attributed to the differences in the nature of commitment and seriousness of responsibilities between married and unmarried women. Another rather alarming job related indication identified from the respondents is their belief (as expressed in the responses) that, the employment issues negatively affected their status in the family. 80.7%, 78.5% and 88.8% of married, unmarried and divorced employed women respectively suggested that, the problems

with their job has affected their status in the family. This is indicative of the stress and self-worth crisis among the women community during the pandemic, which in turn affects the emotional wellbeing and feeling of self-belongingness. The other employment related factors considered are the mode of transportation, requirement for working overtime and options for starting new ventures. Based on the analysis of frequencies, it was found that, these factors have not been manipulated or significant differences happened in these variables as a result of the pandemic. Though there is a bunch of women who work overtime, it is not a new trend developed as part of the changes brought in by the pandemic.

4.5. Spouse Employment and Emotional Wellbeing of Women and Children:

While discussing the impact of employment issues on the emotional wellbeing of women, it is also relevant to identify the causative connection of the employment issues of the parents with the emotional crisis faced by the children and women of these families. Figure 4, represents the pattern identified on this aspect.

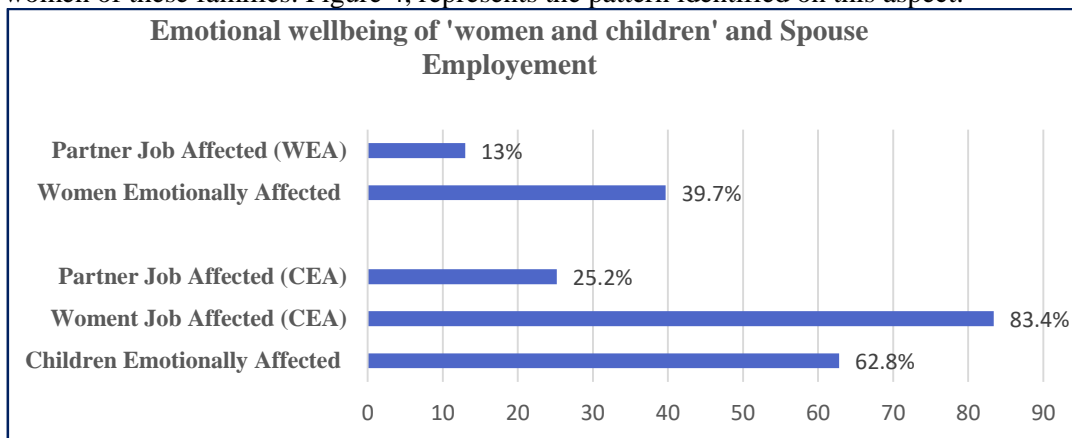


Figure 4: Emotional wellbeing of women and children and spouse employment

As shown in Figure 4, the children are also emotionally affected by the job related issues of their parents, especially that of the mothers. Among the children who are emotionally affected, 83% of them belongs to the families where the mother is facing job related concerns and 25.2% is from families where the father is between a rock and a hard place. Similarly, among the total percentage (39.7%) of women who are emotionally affected, 13% are from families where their partners lost their job because of the pandemic. Consequently, based on the three patterns identified, it may be interpreted that, the children are more affected by the job stress of mother, as compared to that of their fathers or women being affected by their partner’s job loss. The underlying reason for this trend may be that the impact of job related issues on the emotional wellbeing of women impact the children on a more personal dimension. This assumption is supported by the percentage evidence that, among the children who has emotional crisis of different natures, 78.8% of them belongs to the families where women expressed emotional problems and suicidal tendencies. The relationship between these two factors is a two way association, where the mother’s emotional predicaments can affect the children’s psychosomatic wellbeing, and at the same time, the children’s psychological conflicts can add to the stress levels and emotional crisis of the mothers.

4.6. Work from Home Option and Emotional Wellbeing of Women:

Though the percentage of women who were working from home is only 37.8%, a significant pattern was derived, which may be attributed to the population.

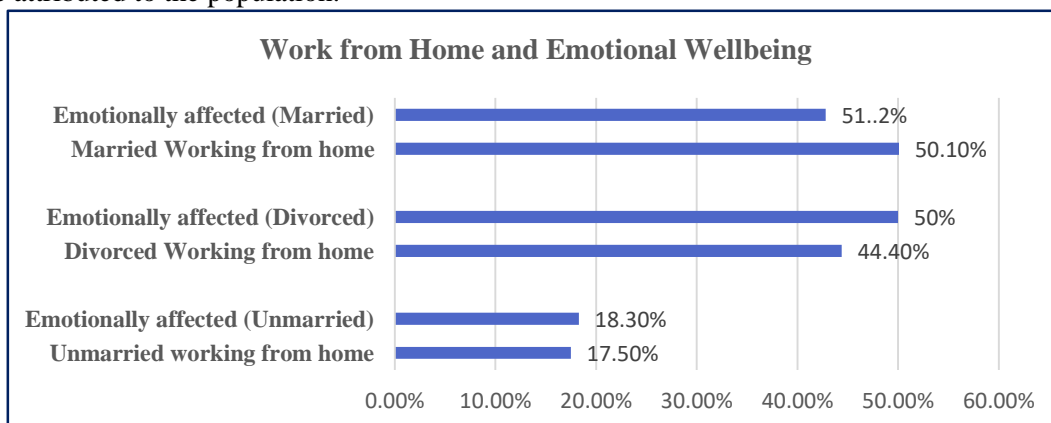


Figure 5: Work from home and Emotional Wellbeing

Out of the 37.8% of women who work from home because of the pandemic situation, 31.2% of women are under stress and faces psychosomatic issues. Both in the cases of married and divorced respondents, who are working from home, more than 50% of them are emotionally affected and are under stress. The pattern identified slightly varies for unmarried respondents, where only 18.3% is emotionally affected. The underlying reason for this variation must be the differences in the responsibilities shouldered by the married and unmarried women. Along with the introduction of online classes, the responsibility handled by the women in the family becomes multidimensional, with children’s education, household responsibilities and job related pressure. The women are who are working from home are forced to shoulder these responsibilities simultaneously and are unable to make compromises in any of the areas, as all of them are of equal priorities. This has resulted in the increased stress and emotional burden for them. The studies conducted to analyse impact of work from home during the pandemic across the globe shows that women faces greater pressure while working from home than men (D.B.Daniel et.al. 2020) and the pandemic has significantly increased the care burden on women (Kate, P., 2020).

4.7. Impacts of other Contributory Factors:

The impact of the other contributory factors, which are assumed to make positive or negative impact on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of the women is also analysed. The factors considered are; domestic Violence, the household work overload without support, absence of social contacts, physical health issues and pregnancies during the pandemic.

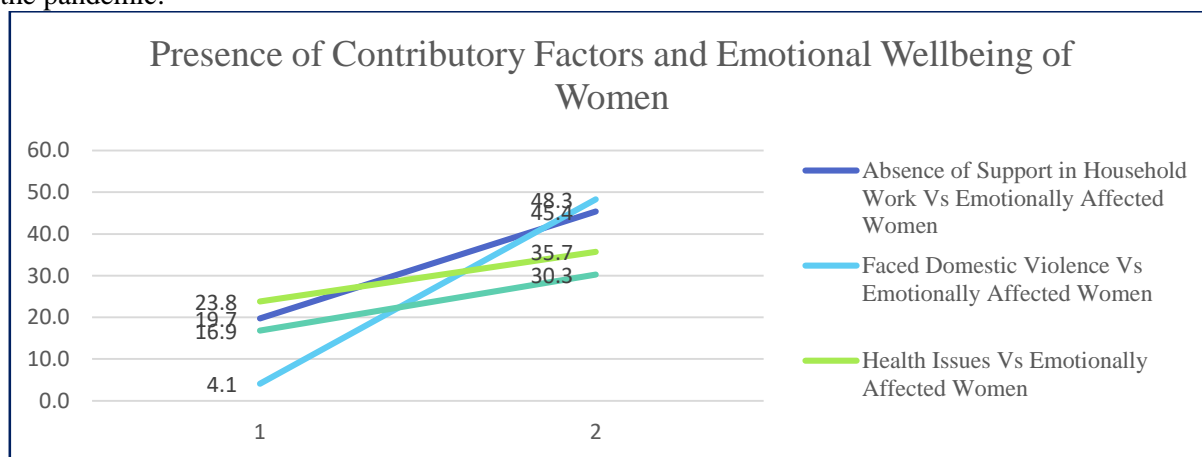


Figure 6: Contributory Factors and Emotional Wellbeing of Women

The figure shows the presence of the contributory factors considered are rather minimal. The percentage of women, who was not supported by the family members in the household activities is only 19.7%, but in this small percentage 45.4% reported that, they faced emotional issues, in terms of stress, suicidal tendency and unhappiness. The second factor is the domestic violence in the families. 4.1% of women faced domestic violence, which is rather comparatively a small number. But the impact of the domestic abuse on the psychological wellness of women is on higher scale, as 48.3% of women who faced domestic violence has psychological traumas. The third factor analysed is the health issues during pandemic. As expected, 23.8% of women faced health problems, but the nature of illness is not studied. Among the women, who had health problems, 35.7% were facing emotional problems. The fourth factor is the chances to maintain social contacts. 16.9% of women were not able to maintain proper social contacts and among them 30.3% were unhappy and were facing emotional crisis. In addition to this, the number of pregnancies during the pandemic is also evaluated. 10% of the women got pregnant during the pandemic but none of it was an unexpected or unplanned pregnancy. Based on the above analyses, it may be interpreted that, in the Kerala context the presence of household related issues like domestic violence and lack of family support is marginal. The living standards and literacy rates must have contributed to this trend. But, for the minor group of women, who faces these issues, its impact on their emotional and psychological wellbeing cannot be ignored. Although health issues are expected to be an inevitable part of the pandemic, care and encouragement from the family members can definitely help women in handling these issues in a healthy manner. The analysis also projected that, majority of the respondents were able to keep in touch with their friends and relatives. The adaptation of communication through digital media in place of face to face communication has supported this process.

5. SUGGESTIONS:

COVID – 19 pandemic being a highly fluid and uncertain occurrence, have created intense, confusing and pivotal issues, which are rather new and the solutions are mostly unknown. Our approach towards this problem should be multi-pronged with comprehensive focus on adaptive solutions. The state and central government should come up

with new initiatives and ventures to support the financially affected families. The Women and Child development department should recognize the emotional needs of the women and children on a wider scale and may also come up with public counselling options, for those who are in need. The people should be made aware of the possibilities for counselling and its positive results. The consequences of the situation created by the pandemic on women and children may be studied in detail by forming a committee and a repository of the people who are affected may be created. It is also possible to make state level interventions through Self-help groups, NGOs and local self-governing bodies, for the women and families who are suffering. The help can be of financial and psychological in nature. A 24/7 COVID 19 wellness hotline for women experiencing anxiety or distress may be created by the government and propagate it through TV and digital medias, so as to provide timely and effective emotional support. On a more personal level, awareness session may be conducted for the parents and children about the dangers and hidden threats in the cyber world. The first strategy to overcome the stress and anxiety due to financial and job related problems is to accept the situation and make efforts to identify new opportunities. Each woman should recognize herself as the power house of the families and take measures to empower themselves. Meditation, Yoga, laughing therapies, music therapies and dance sessions are some of the things that can be done even with online support. It is essential to see the situation on a subjective level and the society should stay together and support each other. The teachers have an important role to play in identifying and understanding the problems faced by the children. By this they can come up with support plans for both the children and the affected families. Mental and emotional wellness sessions may be initiated by the teachers, for both children and mothers.

6. CONCLUSION:

The image of Goddess Durga portrays the picture of every woman managing a family, with multiple hands, capricious passions, compound emotions, aggressive stance and a tender heart. The major problems highlighted in the study are the concern of mothers about their children, problems due to job loss and job related crises and emotional and psychological predicaments. The pandemic is an inescapable and universal problem. So, the solutions also need to be creative and collective in nature. Rather than solutions, what can be offered to the affected people are support systems and measures to create a feeling of self-belongingness. To avoid the chances of cascading impacts, early stage interventions are essential and the state and central governments has important roles to play. Flourishing amidst the contingencies should become the slogan of every woman. Every challenge comes with the gift of a new opportunity. Willingness to adapt, learn and experiment is the key for survival during this turbulence. Touching the lives of people around us is the key to self-actualization and women are the right people to play that part.

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