

## The COVID Pandemic Shocks, The Adolescents Girls, and the Labor Market

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### Abstract

The COVID pandemic is the most unprecedented crisis that the human civilisation has witnessed in the last 100 years. It has done irreparable damage to every walk of human life, including employment opportunities. Though the nature of the pandemic has been non-discriminatory, its impact has been felt differently by different sections of the society. It is the most vulnerable and the marginalised who have been hit the hardest due to their socio-economic position and their inability to overcome it. This paper specifically explores how the young generation, especially adolescent girls who are between the ages group of 12 to 19 years, are being impacted by the pandemic. It also looks at the relationship between the adolescent girl and the labor market in a post-COVID pandemic context.

**Keywords:** *COVID Pandemic; Corona Pandemic; COVID-19; COVID Impact; Pandemic; Adolescents; The Labor Market; Economic Recovery; Humanitarian Crisis; Work & Employment; Inclusive Recovery*

### Introduction

The COVID pandemic has had a never-before impact on the lives and livelihoods of people all over the world. It has impacted every section of the society, from the richest to the poorest, from the people living in swanky areas to people living in slums, people who are elderly and have medical conditions to people who are young and fit. In terms of its impact, it touches every aspect of human lives, right from health to education, from livelihoods to business. Some of the impacts have already unfolded and are evident, while others are still unfolding. The first pillar of the human aspect which has been severely affected is the health conditions, with people getting infected and medical conditions deteriorating. As time passes, the impact of the pandemic on other aspects of life is becoming more visible and pronounced.

The COVID pandemic has also raised huge concerns regarding the fallout on the global economy. Some of the estimates show that it has hit the poorest the hardest, with the World Bank (2020) claiming that it is pushing around 50 to 60 million people into extreme poverty. According to Inanc (2020), the "Stay at Home" and "Shelter in Place Order," combined with social distancing, had put the economy to a grinding halt. These restrictions have translated into partial or full closedown of the enterprises, loss of jobs, changing nature of jobs and migration of people (CCSA, 2020). Due to an

exponential growth in the COVID cases, various states are taking different types of measures ranging from full or partial lockdown, restricted travel, social distancing etc. Though this might have slowed down the rate of the infection, it also has grave consequences on people's economic well-being. Though the economic crisis is yet to unfold, its impact is being felt across all sections of the society. The people who are more vulnerable and have less capacities and resources are the ones who are bearing the brunt of the crisis.

### Impact on economy and the labor market

Though the pandemic is impacting every aspect of human lives, the impact on the economic well-being of the people is resonating across the board. People are concerned about business disruption, losing their jobs leading to underemployment or underemployment or totally becoming irrelevant to the emerging "New Normal" (FAO,2020). The COVID pandemic has put additional pressure on the job market, including the informal sector. This has given rise to poverty, inequality and other kinds of serious impacts on the lives of the excluded and the marginalised (Raihan, 2020). This has had an effect on the employment and labor markets, especially in the informal sector. The most at risk, due to the pandemic, are the people who are self-employed or employed in the local labor market related to construction and agriculture. There are ample evidences from the

field which prove that families are living under severe distress and resorting to negative coping mechanisms like taking loans at unfavorable terms & conditions, distress sale of assets, less food intake and some unethical practices like child labor, exposing themselves and their families to further risks.

Raihan (2020) further elaborates that people are trying to cope with the changing scenario with very high adjustment costs. Sometimes these adjustments are intra-households, wherein the senior citizens or the people with health complications are withdrawing from the labor market, forcing the younger generations to take up the larger responsibility of keeping the kitchen stove burning.

### **The pandemic and its impact on adolescents**

The health shocks of the pandemic have been suffered more by the vulnerable sections of the population, such as elderly people, people with health complications, and people living in the marginalised areas. It has also been observed that elderly people and people with medical conditions are the first to voluntarily move out or to be forced out of the job market. In order to avoid becoming redundant from the labor market, these people might hide their medical and health conditions, which will make them more prone to the Covid virus. Though it is the adults, the people with medical needs, who have been largely affected because of the virus' impact on their health, adolescents between the ages of 10 to 19 years are also among the hardest hit victims of the pandemic. The first direct loss for the adolescents is their education. Though not all the schools globally are closed, most of them are. The less advantaged people do not have many options for education continuity as most of the options are online-based and these people are either not able to afford those or they don't have the access to them.

According to the UNDP (2020), the breakdown in the education system is not just keeping adolescents from acquiring education, but it is also a big impediment to their growth and to acquiring new skills, which ultimately might lead to them less competitive in the job or self-employment market. Some of the poor adolescents in the above age bracket also used to earn their living and complement the family income. It was mostly part-time work, such as taking tuition or supporting their parents in their

business, which has been affected by the pandemic.

The pandemic might further exacerbate the inequalities in human development, which exist between the haves and the have nots (UNDP, 2020). While the parents of other adolescents are educated and help their children to continue their education, the poor adolescents do not have that kind of luxury as their parents are not educated enough to support their children with the education or they struggle with their livelihoods to focus their time on the education of their children. In the event of an adversity, it is the adolescent girls who are forced to drop out and discontinue with their education. This is further compounded by the lack of sufficient space for education for the people living in slums. With the closure of the schools, the adolescent girls are facing an additional burden of taking care of their younger siblings who otherwise attended the school during the daytime. Ria et al (2020) also argue that the situation has also been adversely impacted by the financial crisis due to the lack of a steady and regular income. She further contends that most of the time, the adolescent poor live in perpetual fear due to the lockdown, sometimes for themselves, and sometimes for their parents who are forced and harassed by the administration to remain indoors when they go out to earn their living.

The Pandemic has had a huge impact on the physical and mental health of adolescents. Because of the lockdown or the fear of getting contaminated or the non-availability of the medical practitioners, it has forced many of them to stay with the disease. Though there is not much of an evidence on the impact of COVID 19 related with GBV, there are various evidences which have shown that the incidences of violence against women increase during a crisis (UN Women, 2020). This can also be extrapolated to adolescent girls as they become more vulnerable and exposed to various types of risks. UN Women (2020) also argues that child marriages might have also increased due to the crisis. The harmful social norms in some of the countries might deprive the adolescent girls of proper food and nutrition. It is the women who normally eat last in these contexts, and the reduction in income leading to shrinking food baskets could have an adverse impact on them.

### **The adolescents and the labor market**

According to ILO & UNICEF (2020), during the last two decades, there has been considerable progress in the elimination of child labor. But the development gains might suffer a huge setback and go back to where it was decades ago. It is also expected that more and more children and adolescents will be forced into hazardous industries. It might also lead to widening gender inequalities within the family, with girls expected to perform additional household chores, agricultural work and take the burden of sustaining the livelihoods of the family.

ILO and UNICEF (2020) also illustrates that there are several factors which can cause the aggravation or intensification of child labor such as poverty, social norms condoning it, lack of decent work opportunities for adults and adolescents, migrations and emergencies. On an average, around 55% of the people amounting to 4 billion do not have any social protection. It also states that the number of people falling to extreme poverty could soar by 420 million in extreme circumstances this year alone as the global economy contracts between 5 to 15%. There are also various social stigmas associated with the pandemic, which puts the adolescents in greater risks. This needs to be addressed and it should be ensured that the community has scientific knowledge and temperament to address the issues related with this disease. These factors have become more prominent during the COVID pandemic and have the potential to replace the adults with the adolescents and children in the labor market.

While there is no disaggregated data on the role of adolescents in unpaid care, it is the women who primarily take care of this responsibility. Women in Bangladesh, on an average, performed 3.43 times more unpaid domestic work (BBS Gender Statistics in UN Women, 2020). It is argued that the closure of schools for adolescents has put them under an additional burden of unpaid care work. UN Women (2020) also quotes another survey by the same agency that shows that the responsibility to take care of adults with health complications or who are not able to take care of themselves often falls on women. It has been explained earlier that these people are at a greater risk of COVID contamination, thus putting their caregivers at risk as well. There are high chances that the adolescents could be forced into the labor market

as pandemic might turn them into the sole breadwinners. There could be several factors which indicate whether they enter the labor market voluntarily or involuntarily. It might lead to exploitation & protection related issues, underemployment, employment in hazardous industries etc.

Inanc (2020) argues that the pandemic could also have a huge impact on the youths and adolescents who were on the cusp of entering the labor market. The labor market requires acquisition of certain skills and expertise to get engaged in decent work and employment. The COVID pandemic has kept these facilities shut or sometimes operating at a very limited scale online. People who have access to online facilities could manage with a modicum of experience, however those who are less privileged remain under-skilled.

### **How is the labor market reacting to the pandemic**

Based on past experiences, especially during the Ebola outbreak, UNICEF and IRC (undated) contends that these kinds of crises exacerbate economic hardships of those people who were already in vulnerable positions. The exposure of adolescent girls to sexual violence, harassment and other types of gender-based violence increases sharply. It provides opportunities to perpetrators to exploit those who need to attain basic services to survive. There have been examples from similar kinds of crises, where the adolescent girls have been forced to enter into prostitution, with the perpetrators grooming the families experiencing hardships to sell their children for a petty amount of money. Some of the researchers have also called the Ebola Crisis as a silent "epidemic of rape, sexual assault and violence against women and girls" (UNICEF, IRC, Undated).

One of the biggest casualties of the pandemic has been regarding work and employment. It has had a huge impact on the industrial and the agriculture sector, thus impacting a majority of the labor force globally. Various industries have come to a sudden halt, forcing millions of people out of work. CCSA (2020) estimates that there could be a global drop in the global work hours by 10.5% equivalent to 305 million workers full-time. It further states that by April 2020, around 81% of the workforce will be living in countries with mandatory lockdowns, which makes this

the worst global crisis after the second World War.

The drop in employment due to the impact of the pandemic also implies reduced income to families and pushing them further into poverty. A combination of reduced income and deepening poverty could have some direct consequences on the lives and livelihoods of the people, like their food & nutrition security, ability to afford education & health services and their resilient building measures.

### **The way forward for the adolescents in the labor market**

In order to ensure that due to the socio-economic pressure the adolescents are not being forced voluntarily or involuntarily into the labor markets, The World Bank (2020,a) suggests that the policy makers should promote resilient or shock-responsive social safety net programs. The COVID pandemic brings in a different dimension to the vulnerable and the vulnerabilities, with new sets of people falling into it. It is also recommended to ensure that the Social Safety Net programs should have the scope to add in new vulnerables. ILO (2020) worker-specific and friendly protection measures would encourage the existing workers to return to work.

Young people and adolescents should be at the center of the economic & social recovery crisis that has been unleashed by the COVID Pandemic (Fine, Reichle and Lord, 2020). They should not just be considered as the victims of this crisis, but as people who can contribute to economic and social recovery. This pandemic is also affecting 2.7 billion workers, which is around 81% of the workforce globally. This could also impede youths from entering the appropriate job market. 'Educate, engage and employ' could be the key mantra. Education focusing on rebuilding the workforce should keep in mind the challenges and opportunities that the pandemic has created. Engaging the youth through proper counselling, handholding support and their immersion into the industry and employing based on their capabilities, needs and aspirations is necessary.

Save the Children (2016) elaborates about a multi-pronged focus on enhancing the resilience of the poor and the marginalised, which includes shock management & mitigation, building assets and capabilities, resilient & adaptive livelihoods

and change in market systems. While the shock management & mitigation focuses on ability to cope and recover from external shock without negative coping mechanisms, building assets & capabilities banks strengthens income opportunities by focusing on skills and productive assets. Resilient & adaptive livelihoods has resilience as the overarching framework with focus on rights & entitlement, whereas the markets systems endeavor to enhance the access of the community to a fair and equitable market. It may also be noted that the participation of the adolescents in the process at every stage could be very crucial to incorporate their perspective and their needs & aspirations.

To ensure that the people out of the labor market do not have a drastic impact on their overall well-being, the government should come out with cash transfer benefits as well as compensation for income loss. Proper mechanisms like a ban on temporary eviction if people are not able to pay the house rent, concession on other support services like electricity and water should be started till the economy recovers and till people have the means to pay. These are some policy level decisions which need to be reinforced to ensure that people do not downslide further and become more vulnerable. It would be crucial to bring multiple stakeholders together and find out a durable solution.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID pandemic has impacted every aspect of our lives, right from how we interact with each other, how we travel, how we eat & what we eat, and even to what livelihood options we chose. The pandemic, based on the experiences from the past and accumulated learnings from the current crisis, calls for a demand-led recovery and resilience building plans that keep the community, especially the common people, at the center of the discourse and planning process. The government should come out with policies and support the private sectors to encourage them to retain elderly people and people with health conditions in the labor market.

There is no second thought about the pandemic causing major disruptions in the skills and employment sector. An appropriate mechanism is recommended to ensure that the most

vulnerable and the marginalised youths, including adolescent girls, should have access to quality skill training, ably supported by counseling and job placement services.

To ensure psycho-social and economic well-being of the young entrants in the labor market, a proper tracking mechanism needs to be developed that captures the well-being of these new entrants. Possibilities for “Work from Home” options could also be explored for those people who are unable to move out of their home.

To sum it up, the COVID pandemic has the potential to escalate into a protracted crisis impacting every aspect of human lives. The early indicators point to a huge disruption in the market and market systems, including the job and the labor market. Complex crisis calls for long-term and sustained solutions, and this can only happen if various stakeholders come and work together with the people who are the most affected to find the way forward, based on the needs and aspirations of the people.

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