

The Challenges of COVID-19 Pandemic on Working Women: The Need for Comprehensive Social Support System

Nurulbahiah Awang *

Universiti Tenaga Nasional

Email: nurulbahiah@uniten.edu.my

Salma Yusof

National Defence University Malaysia

Email: salma@upnm.edu.my

Nassar Nordin

PhD Candidate, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

Email: abiummi79@raudah.usim.edu.my

** Corresponding Author*

Abstract

Purpose: Women worker faced with various sets of obstacles caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. Among the highlighted causes contributing to this situation are the triple burden of women roles, existing gender inequality domestic roles, inequality in working policy, and unequal power relations in private and public spheres of women.

Design/methodology/approach: This is a qualitative study highlighting the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women, particularly from education, health, economic, social and psychological aspects. The study relies on the data collected from reports, articles and journals on challenges on women worker during this COVID-19 Pandemic. It includes local and international discussion on the challenges and impact of women worker during pandemic.

Findings: This study finds out that in order to empower women for sustainable development, women need transformation and cooperation from family members around them, organisation they are working for, lucrative government policy and interactive neighbourhood circle to support their life. It should be looked into from both perspectives; women who work from home and women who continue to work from office.

Practical implications: In relations to that, economic policies, political aspect and family arrangements need to be deliberate and executed through a gender's perspective.

Paper type: Conceptual paper

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Social support system, Working women, Gender issues and challenges

The Beginning of COVID-19 Pandemic

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, was initially discovered in December 2019. It was believed to originate from City, Hubei Province, China. It became a public health emergency of international proportion in January 2020, and was subsequently recognised as a pandemic in March 2020. As of 22 August 2021, more than 1.5 billion positive cases with more than 14,000 deaths reported in Malaysia (Ministry of Health Website, 23 August 2021) and more

than 209 million cases have been reported worldwide with more than 4 million deaths (World Health Organisation Website, 20 August 2021).

The Coronavirus disease spreads quickly and easily through the air, predominantly through small droplets produced when an infected person breathes, coughs, sneezes, talks between people who are physically close. The disease may also be spread via contaminated surfaces though this has not been proven convincingly. It is contagious for up to two days prior to actually symptom onset and from symptomatic infected people. Due to that reasons, it is therefore critical to maintain proper respiratory sanitation at all times (World Health Organisation Website).

The first case of COVID-19 in Malaysia was detected on 25 January 2020. It started when the three Chinese nationals had close contact with an infected individual in Singapore (New Straits Time, 2020). Malaysia COVID-19 cases surged after 5 March 2020. It was reported that the number of cases had increased sharply by 80% to 428 on 15 March (Parveen, 2020). The Malaysian government then announced a nationwide lockdown starting from 18 March 2020. Under the Movement Control Order (MCO), except for essential services, all others establishments were ordered to closed. The Order was intended to last from March 18 to March 31, but it was extended four times in two-week "phases" over the course of two months. On June 7, 2020, that the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) would end on June 9, 2020, and that the country would enter the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) for the rest of the year. Until today, it still continue with several kind of Standard Operational Procedure (SOP) suitable with the condition of the COVID-19 cases of each states.

Women as Formal and Informal Caregivers

Women make up the majority of health and social care workers even before the Pandemic. During this COVID-19 Pandemic, women workers such doctors, nurses, midwives, community health workers are among the front liners in health facilities. With 70% of the involvement of women in the health-care workforce, making them more vulnerable to illness. (United Women Website).

As the result of the lock down order, schools and day cares were closed in many countries including Malaysia. Meanwhile, there were also many parents who still require to go to work. Many of their children were left alone or without adequate care at home. There were concerns especially from working parents about children's protection and well-being. While working at home, many women are doing double or triple duty, looking after children and providing education while also working full-time. It was becoming very clear that the outbreak of this virus brought about implications that reached far beyond the direct impacts on people's physical health but also on women's psychological health. Moreover, women also are overrepresented in several of the industries most impacted by national lockdowns, including accommodation and food services, the textile industry, retail, and education (APRU webinar: Workshop on Impact of COVID-19 on Women in Higher Education" (December 2, 2020).

Many employed people, particularly women, may have found it difficult to balance work and family life during the lockdown. According to gender talk, men and women prioritise work and family in various ways. When it comes to giving priority, males prioritise job, while women prioritise family. Bhumika (2020) suggests that working women may experience more emotional exhaustion than men for the fear of lay-off and the demands of household responsibilities. Women struggle to maintain a balance between their work and personal life as a result of gender-specific duties in society. It is reported that the major reason for the imbalance is the family's disproportionate care responsibilities borne by women (Khazanah Research Institute, 2018). Due to commitments towards family, many women are unable to balance in the labour field, despite their educational achievements.

Research shows that unpaid care work accounts for 64.4 percent of women's weekly working hours, compared to 36.1 percent for men. (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Australia). Women care duties within their private sphere as mother, daughter, sister, neighbour and community at large have been categorised as unpaid care work of women. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the unpaid and invisible labour in this domain dramatically. Furthermore, during this Pandemic this unseen work become more essential to the daily functioning of families, communities, and the formal economy.

Women's unpaid care work or informal caregivers has long been recognised as a factor of inequality. In some countries, the report states that 35% of women are paid less than men. Even before the pandemic, the vast majority of women's employment (70 %) is in the informal economy, with minimal safeguards against dismissal or paid sick leave, as well as restricted access to social security. They have less access to social protections and head the majority of single-parent households. Therefore, women tend to find flexible work in juggling between family and work. Women are said to earn less, save less, have less secure jobs, and are more likely to work in the informal sector.

Therefore, it is essential to highlight these issues especially during this COVID-19 pandemic which affect mostly the lives of working women and single parent due gender inequities, social norms, and unequal power relations which are all strongly ingrained. As such, a comprehensive social support system is applauded to balance the lives of working women.

The Challenges of COVID-19 Pandemic on Working Women

The COVID-19 pandemic really affects the life of working women. It has been contended that women facing three broad categories of challenges which are productive, reproductive and community work (Moser, 1993). Productive work involves the production of goods and the provision of services. Whereas, reproductive categories concerning childbearing, cooking, cleaning, and caring for family members, including youngsters, the sick, and the old. Community service is frequently related with volunteerism and focuses on improving community resources (Mc Laren et al., 2020). Research in United Kingdom reported that working women experiencing stress 40 percent higher than the average person (Berita Harian Online, July 5, 2021). The national poll conducted by Newgate Research reported that women suffer from personal and professional stress and bearing a treble burden throughout the crisis. This includes paid employment, caring work, and anxious mental labour (Breen, 2020).

It has been conveyed in another research that the impact of COVID-19 regarding physical activities and psychological well-being showed a higher positive co-relation in females as compared to males (Maugeri et al., 2020). In the educational field for example, a survey conducted by Dr. Bahar Mehmani, the Reviewer Experience Lead in Elsevier's Global STM journals, showed that female researchers' submissions grew at a slightly slower pace than male researchers'. Female academics' growth was much slower later in their careers, leading her to assume that closures of their children's schools had a negative influence on women researchers in their middle years (Squazzoni, Flaminio et al. 2020).

Based on the SUHAKAM report, since schools are temporarily closed by the government in order to contain the spread of the COVID-19, the mother is mostly responsible for home schooling, and more often than not is expected to juggle between domestic core and work-from-home responsibilities (Asia Pacific Forum, 2020). During the lockdown, everyone in the family was confined to one house. While it provided an opportunity to develop and strengthen family bonding, it also created challenges in managing family responsibilities. Trying to balance work and family obligations was a difficult undertaking particularly to the women who most of the time were burdened with the household chores. The persisting situation may lead to emotional exhaustion. Women are managing household duties and office work at home

during the lockdown, leaving them physically and psychologically weary, potentially contributing to an increase in anxiety levels. It becomes worse when some workplace does not accommodate the needs of people with caring responsibilities during this pandemic (Breen, 2020). He illustrates that in India, it is common for women to serve the family. Women are more stressed than men because they ponder on life's challenges, which can intensify anxiety. From the survey carried out on the various working industries in Malaysia, it is found that 63% of the workers do not have ample time with the family due to work (Ismail, 2017, 197). As similar to women they are struggling to work in order to strengthen the family economy. Through a survey done in 2019 among Muslim women, it is found that they are working in order to help their husband is 30.5% and working as breadwinner in the family is 32.9% (Awang, Yusoff, Mat Isa & Mohd Yusof, 2019). It shows that more than 62% of Muslim women work because of their accountability to the family.

In another perspective, incidences and reports of violence against women within the household have also risen. It is stated that problems faced by Malaysian government in achieving gender equality is hindered by cultural and tradition social constructs (Awang, 2018; Kazgan, 1982; Shahrizat Jalil, 2008) whereby women were often portrayed as followers and supporters and not as respected person or equal partners at home or outside home. Due to lockdown, many women were isolated in a space that was supposed to be safe but this was often not the case. Many of these women were now confined in their houses with their abusers, putting them at risk of more violence. It is reported that the divorce cases were increasing heavily during pandemic. Among the leading causes of divorce due to many husbands lose their source of income to being laid off as a result of COVID-19 (Sinar Harian, Disember 2020). From the research conducted, during a pandemic, stress, disruption of social and protective networks, loss of income, and reduced access to services can all increase the risk of violence for women. (Ciarambino et al., 2021). Even though the coronavirus infected more males than females, the result finds that females have demonstrated higher prevalence of posttraumatic stress symptoms than males.

At the global level, 30% of women experienced violence from intimate partners. Prior to the pandemic, it was estimated that one out of every three women would face violence at some point in their lives. In India, millions of people in the informal sector, particularly migrant labourers, have suffered a heavy blow as a result of stringent lockout and other measures. The data from the interviews led to the development of six themes about the impact of COVID-19 on women migrant workers which include: loss of livelihood and resulting debt; compromises; confinement and the burden of duty; interrupted access; COVID-19 emotional landscapes; and a lack of support (Azeez et al., 2021).

The Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER) estimates as many as 2.4 million Malaysian are likely to lose their jobs as a consequence of COVID-19. The state of Johor for example, recorded a total of 15,597 workers from various sector who experiencing salary reduction and were retrenched during the period of the Movement Control Order (MCO) (Noh, 2020). In fact, there was already an increase in the unemployment rate especially in the service sector such as food and beverage, agriculture, as well as the construction sector (Rabeatul Husna, 2020).

During Pandemic, as most economic operations came to a halt, adhering to tight standard operating procedures, it was reported that the labour market experienced substantial shifts. Overall, this led in total employment falling to 14.88 million people in Q22020, while the unemployment rate rose to 5.1 %. The service industry which involves women, namely the accommodation, food and beverage, and arts, entertainment and leisure subsectors, saw a decrease in employed people, however certain sectors, such as e-commerce, delivery services,

and information and communication technology, saw a gain in employed people (Malaysian Bureau of Labour Statistic, Department of Statistics, 2020).

Sexual and reproductive health services, including maternal health care and gender-based violence services, are critical to women's and girls' health, rights, and well-being. As a result of pandemic, women and girls may find it much more difficult to receive care and health services. The health consequences can be disastrous, particularly in rural and low-literacy areas where women are less likely to have access to quality health care (United Nations, 2020). Women need reproductive healthcare services such as in family planning, care during pregnancy as well as after delivery, during menopause which is not covered by the existing organisational system of medical benefit. Increasing maternal mortality and morbidity, as well as increased rates of HIV, and sexually transmitted illnesses, may arise from diverting attention to these problems. As it was reported that the current environment of COVID-19 pandemics, 18 million women in Latin America and the Caribbean will lose regular access to modern contraceptives (UNFPA Global Response Plan, 2020).

In response to COVID-19 pandemic, schools, universities, and colleges were fast to implement multiple measures to protect their most important stakeholders, in particular the students. It was a significant challenge for educational institution like schools, colleges, and universities, as there were major changes to the usual operational work on student evaluation, registration, teaching methods, learning, research, seminars, and meetings, among other things. Pandemic COVID-19 has changed the methods of teaching and learning in schools as well as higher institutions. All physical lectures had to be replaced with online lectures. This sudden change also has a high impact on teachers and academicians. Among them is the preparation of learning materials that need to be modified and improved to suit the method of online system delivery. To be sure, not all academicians have good access and expert in information technology system techniques. Thus, the impact is not only on the economic challenges but also the mental and physical health condition of academicians that needs to be taken into account by the highest level of management. This issue is serious especially in preparing for changes of teaching and learning methodology. Universities should act immediately because academicians are the driving force behind the education system and their mental health conditions should also be at the optimum level.

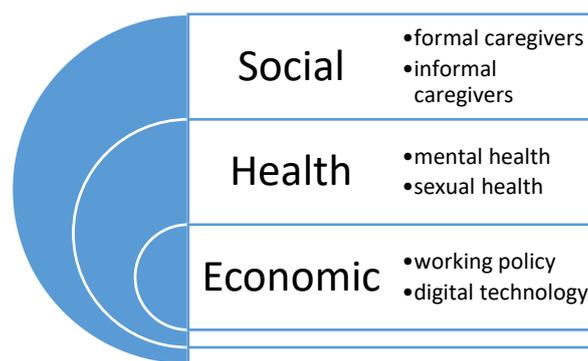


Figure 1: The Challenges of COVID-19 Pandemic on Women

Methods

This research employs descriptive approach. The data are collected from secondary sources such as books, journals, reports, news, and website sources which are authentic and reliable. The sources are more on discussion, suggestion and situation facing women worker during this

pandemic COVID-19. It covers overall discussion on the challenges of COVID-19 Pandemic from local and international perspective, individual, institution and government information.

Findings

Since women are actively involved in both public and private spheres, a comprehensive social support system must incorporate family institution, the organisation and the neighbourhood or community. It is found that women worker need a comprehensive social support system to empower their public and private spheres. The working women's support system should accommodate the needs of working women which are varied according to the situation and context which include those who are working at home or outside home, single mother or daughter. The needs and benefits of women worker should be looked in the eyes of women private and public spheres for women empowerment and sustainable development.

Discussion and Conclusion

The challenges faced by working women during this pandemic affects all aspects of their life. The impacts are due to unpredictable event happened in 2020 due to nature of COVID-19 disease. The existing gender imbalance practice in social, economic and political aspects also worsen the women's worker's life during the pandemic. As women are primary caregivers, formally or informally, the situation needs to be urgently addressed and supported through adequate ideas and policies for women sustainable development. For example, majority of women are involved as formal caregivers in education and healthcare as their career. Whereas informally, women are also play important roles as caregivers at home which is done without any payment. It is argued among the feminist as unpaid care work or domestic work done by women. In order to solve this issue, women workers need social support especially from husband to take care of children and also helping them in managing the household. The concept of balance and complementariness in marriage and family relationship should be carried with love, respect and duty of care to each other. As for Muslims, if every husband aware that he has primary responsibility to the inner and outer maintenance of the family members, the problems with regard to the unbalance rights and duties or unpaid care work in private sphere of women would be better. This balance of rights and duties between wife and husband will also influence standard of women's health.

Working women also need support from organisation that she works for. An organisation should provide a just policy which is non-gendered policy for women worker. For example, working organisation should provide a benefit policy and employment opportunity without discrimination against women. The implementation of gender mainstreaming uphold by the government involves changes in both 'internal' organisational and 'external' operational procedures is one of the policy taken to meet the goal and values of gender equality to be truly understood in the right context by all people. It is suggested that in gender mainstreaming programmes on women's public sphere, the government in forming its policy should take into consideration the primary duties of women in the private sphere to determine the best protection measures that are in line with women's interest by considering the collective rights and duties in a family institution. It is proposed that the government should considers the policy to preserve women's private roles such as to provide Malaysian Maid Academy among the educated and skilled persons to help working women to achieve a high level of performance in the public sphere without neglecting their primary roles as mother or wife within their private sphere. It is also proposed that a women driver is provided by the organisation or government to accompany the female executives for outstation assignments.

As during this pandemic, majority of working women are working from home, they need support from neighborhoods surrounding them for healthy social life. A caring, warm neighborhood gives impact to the mental and psychological health of women during pandemic. It has been highlighted in the General Recommendation No. 24 (20th session, 1999) of CEDAW Committee to remove discrimination in order to ensure that women have access to the best possible health. The objective of CEDAW is to eliminate discrimination in politics, law, employment, education, marriage and family matters and health care.

Thus, a comprehensive social support system for working women should be addressed in order to highlight their roles. It is in line with the aspiration of the Eighth Prime Minister of Malaysia that women empowerment should be done by actively providing continuous support for them to overcome challenges. Since women nowadays are involved in economic, social and political development to sustain the family and society, the systems governing women in these aspects have to react positively for women empowerment in achieving women sustainable development for national and worldwide development. Beyond the immediate crisis, it's possible that certain residual effects on societal standards will contribute to greater equality. Due to this sudden phenomena, women needs more reliable and effective support system. All these challenges must be look into from the perspective of those women who work from home and those women who continue to work from the office. Therefore, women need transformation and cooperation from family members around them, organisation that they are working for, better government policy and interactive neighborhood circle to support their life. Beyond this, the whole range of economic policies, political aspect and family arrangements need to be designed and implemented through a gender lens. This includes giving women same opportunity in economic, social and political activities suitable with their context.

Theoretical Implications

This paper relates to gender perspective and women empowerment for sustainable development.

Practical and Social Implications

This research has direct impact on women's worker. The finding may help policy makers and organisation to empower working women.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This paper basically focusses on the challenges and impacts of COVID-19 on women workers. It is suggested that further research focusses on specific categories of women workers or the support system required by them.

References

- Abdullah, N. (1984). *Gender Ideology and the Public Lives of Malay Women in Peninsular Malaysia*. University of Washington.
- Ahmad, A., Rahman, I., & Agarwal, M. (2020). Early psychosocial predictors of mental health among Indians during coronavirus disease 2019 outbreak. *Journal of Health Sciences*, 10(2), 147–156. <https://doi.org/10.17532/jhsci.2020.950>
- Awang, N. (2018). *The Women's Convention (CEDAW) and The Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) ACT 1984: Constructing Harmonisation on Gender Equality* [Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM)]. <http://ddms.usim.edu.my:80/jspui/handle/123456789/17894>
- Awang, N. B., Yusoff, A., Mat Isa, A. A. & Mohd Yusof, S. B. (2019). Kesedaran Wanita Muslim Tentang Hak dan Tanggungjawab Dalam Keluarga dan Kerjaya: Kajian Kes di

- Uniten dan UPNM. *Al-Irsyad: Journal of Islamic and Contemporary Issues*, 4(2), 171–187.
- Azeez, E P, A., Negi, D. P., Rani, A., & A P, S. K. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on migrant women workers in India. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 62(1), 93–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1843513>
- Asia Pacific Forum of National Human rights Institutions. (2020, July). The Impact of COVID-19 on Women and Girls: A Snapshot of Responses from Nine National Human Rights Institutions in the Asia Pacific Region.
- Berita Harian Online, 5 Julai 2021 Bantu wanita berkerjaya harungi pandemik
- Bhumika. (2020). *Challenge for wok-life balance during COVID-19 induced nationwide lockdown: exploring gender difference in emotional exhaustion in the Indian setting*. <https://www.emerald.com/insight/1754-2413.htm>
- Breen, M. (2020). Has COVID-19 changed how we view flexible work? *Women Agenda*. <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/has-covid-19-changed-how-we-view-flexible-work/>
- Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic UNFPA Global Response Plan (April 2020)
- Ciarambino, T., Rotunno, S., Bizzi, E., & Lorenzi, F. (2021). COVID-19 and gender differences: Lights and shadows. *Italian Journal of Medicine*, 14(4), 228–230. <https://doi.org/10.4081/ITJM.2020.1407>
- Khazanah Research Insitute. (2018). *Part 02- The Malaysian workforce: A changing landscape*. 76–134. http://www.krinstitute.org/assets/contentMS/img/template/editor/Part2_KRI_SOH_2018.pdf
- International Labour Organisation. (2021). *Empowering Women at Work - Government Law and Policies for Gender Equality*. Geneva.
- Ismail, S. S. H. (2017). Mengurus antara keluarga dan kerjaya organisasi: Analisis melalui pendekatan Al-Tadayyun, Al- Maqasid dan Al-Wasatiyyah. *Akademika*, 87(3), 195-206.
- Malaysian Bureau of Labour Statistic, Department of Statistics, M. (2020). *Labour Market Review, Malaysia, Second Quarter 2020* (Issue August 2020).
- Maugeri, G., Castrogiovanni, P., Battaglia, G., Pippi, R., D’Agata, V., Palma, A., Di Rosa, M., & Musumeci, G. (2020). The impact of physical activity on psychological health during COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. *Heliyon*, 6(6), e04315. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e04315>
- Mc Laren, H. J., Wong, K. ., Nguyen, K. N. & Mahamadachchi, K. N. D. (2020). COVID 19 and women’s triple burden: Vignettes from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Vietnam and Australia. *Social Sciences*. 9 (87).
- Moser, C. (1993). *Gender planning and development: Theory, practice, and planning*. Routledge.
- New Straits Times. (2020, Jan 25). 3 corona virus cases confirmed in Johor Bharu. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/01/559563/breaking-3-coronavirus-cases-confirmed-johor-baru>.
- Noh, M. F. (2020, June 14). 15 597 Pekerja dipotong gaji, diberhentikan kerja. <https://www.hmetro.com.my/mutakhir/2020/04/572944/15597-pekerja-dipotong-gaji-diberhentikan-kerja>
- Parveen, D. (2020, April 1). Coronavirus in Malaysia: COVID-19 outbreak, measures and impact. <https://www.pharmaceutical-technology.com/features/coronavirus-affected-countries-malaysia-covid-19-outbreak-measures-tourism-economy-impact/>
- Rahman, M. F. W., Kistyanto, A. & Surjanti, J. (2020). Flexible work arrangements in COVID-19 pandemic era, influence employee performance: The mediating role of innovative

- work behaviour. *International Journal of Management, Innovation & Entrepreneurial Research*, 6 (2). <https://doi.org/10.18510/ijmier.2020.622>
- Sinar Harian Online, Disember 2020 Kes perceraian di Malaysia rekodkan peningkatan luar biasa Artikel Penuh :
<https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/116749/BERITA/Nasional/Kes-perceraian-di-Malaysia-rekodkan-peningkatan-luar-biasa> © 2018 Hakcipta Terpelihara Kumpulan Karangraf
- Squazzoni, F., Bravo, G., Grimaldo, F., Garcia-Costa, D., Farjam, M. & Mehmani, B. (2020, October 16.). Only second-class tickets for women in the COVID rase – A study on manuscript submission and reviews in 2329 Elsevier Journals. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3712813>
- United Nations. (2020, April 9). The Impact of COVID-19 on Women. Policy Brief.
- Warth, L. & Koparanova, M. (2012). Empowering Women for Sustainable Development. UNECE Discussion Paper Series No. 2012.1
- Zainuddin, A. & Aboo Talib. K.K. (2018). Konsep mengarusperdanakan gender: Kajian wanita dalam pekerjaan di Malaysia. *Journal of Administrative Science*, 15(1), 1-10.