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## THE “UNTOLD” SIDE OF COVID-19: WOMEN AND CAREGIVING

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**Abstract:** Caregiving is an unpaid, under resourced activity that falls disproportionately on women and girls worldwide. Those who care for a family member or loved one face an array of challenges as they juggle between paid work, unpaid Caregiving responsibilities, and their own personal needs and health. Yet, the work of these care takers is mostly overlooked because it is not measured in traditional economic productivity indicators. Women provide the majority of informal care to spouses, parents, parents-in-law, friends and neighbors along with their daily duties and responsibilities. This study investigates the lived experience of a woman as a care giver and the challenges they have faced in their lives in specific to the context of COVID-19 pandemic by collecting the narratives of a woman in context of Assam.

**Keywords:** Caregiving, COVID-19, Gender Role, Lived Experience, Pandemic.

### Introduction

Caregiving is a major part of life for millions of women. More than 25 million women – almost one in seven – provide care to family members or friends (Kalil et al., 2020). Caregiving doesn't wait for ideal conditions. They continue during and throughout a crisis and most likely become more challenging during humanitarian crises. There are clear links between caregiver mental health and child development because when parents struggle with their mental health, they will often struggle to provide the kind of nurturing care that is needed for their young children to develop. In many communities, women have faced greater economic shock as they are more likely to work in the informal sectors. The combined socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on female caregivers is expected to cause significant mental and emotional stress. In order to address these issues, it is important to use the current COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to address some of the discriminatory gender norms and roles that negatively impact female caregivers, particularly in the household<sup>1</sup>. This study investigates the lived experiences of a woman during pandemic by interpreting her narratives. The expression “lived experiences” refers to the experiences of the everyday life-world, which are pre-reflective and therefore less available to our awareness (Missel et al., 2021, p.83). Methodologically, lived experience allows a researcher to use a single life to learn about society and how individual experiences are communicated (Boylorn, 2008, p. 489). The method concentrates on what people do? How they do it? (Boylorn, 2008, p. 490) and how they make meaning of these experiences?

In this paper we are looking at how the COVID-19 pandemic and the policy response to it – including stay-at-home orders, new rules and regulations –creates a stressful environment for families through many channels and also affecting women's lives in particular.

### Objective of the Study

- To understand and analyze the experiences of women during COVID 19 pandemic by listening to the ‘untold’ story of a woman from Assam.

### Methodology

#### Research Design

The study is a qualitative study and therefore it is descriptive and explanatory. Semi structured interview technique is used. Case study method is applied to gain deep insight into the life of woman which this study is dealing with. According to Pauline V. Young, case study is a “comprehensive study of a social unit is that unit a person, a group, a social institution, a district or a community” (Young, 1956).

### Participants and recruitment

The research participant was a woman working in an informal sector serving the role and responsibility of a mother, widower, and a working woman who has recovered from COVID-19 disease and the resident of Tezpur town in Sonitpur district of Assam. The above participant is selected through convenience sampling keeping in mind the urgency of the study.

<sup>1</sup> Malik, Sana and Naem, Khansa. (May 2020). Policy Review Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Health, livelihoods & domestic violence



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## Data Collection

The designed planned for the collection of data was that of **in-depth longitudinal interview** by following an unstructured interview schedule which helped the researcher to gather enough information by listening to the narratives of the respondent. To complete the study both primary and secondary data are used.

Verbal consent has been taken from the research participants to record their narratives. However, they did not consent to write their original names; thereby we maintained anonymity of the participants in the article.

## Results and Discussions

This section presents three themes that have been emerged throughout our study. The first theme offers the idea of Gendered Dimension of Pandemic. Secondly, the Caregiving responsibilities of women which is a discussion towards an exploration of “being-in the-struggle” and finally the Fear of Social Distancing: A Double-pandemic.

### The Gendered Dimension of Pandemic

COVID-19 is having an impact on all sectors of society across the world. But its impact doesn't fall equally: the virus seems to discriminate between rich and poor, young and old, male and female but it is in fact taking advantage of pre-existing inequalities. Our respondent who is at her mid 40's narrated “I think this pandemic will take our lives. I am tired of this constant guilt of not being able to do anything for my children. They'll curse me one day.” The women believe her responsibility as a strong mother and the only parent to her three children will not be fulfilled as because this pandemic has taken her regular job away. After her husband's death she has to take the role of both financial provider and nurturer & caretaker at the same time to her children. She continues narrating “I am supposed to act stronger than before, but at times I fail.”

Eagly's social role theory (1987) suggests the societal expectations based on stereotype produces gender roles and behavior where a woman is seen as an epitome of emotional expressiveness and to be associated with domestic activities.<sup>2</sup> But the reality differs as there's always this grey area where a woman has to take up multiple roles if needed irrespective of gender. Thus, there is a dilemma with regard to what is expected from a woman. This woman whom the researcher has interviewed faces the dilemma of whether to lead the life of misery being a widower and single mother or to shape her life in her own terms.

### Caregiving responsibilities of women: Discussion on the narratives of ‘being-in the-struggle’

The interpretative understanding and narrative analysis of the present study helps us to understand the role of a single woman during pandemic which ranges from excessive household responsibilities and Caregiving roles to low waged, precarious, unprotected employment. Entrenched stereotypes insist that men are breadwinners while women are homemakers and caregivers. In a report by Anil Patel, 2018 to the OECD these gendered stereotypes are present today with woman across the world spending up to ten times more time on unpaid care work than man.<sup>3</sup> The narrative account of the respondent helps us to reflect on several dimensions of life of a woman. As she narrates,

“I got married at the age of 20. I started working from the age of 19 in a soap factory where I was humiliated and made to work extra hours for the owners. A fellow worker tried molesting me soon after joining the factory which was my biggest terror back then. I got married to a man who was supportive. But with time he started skipping work every now and then and fell into the trap of alcohol addiction in no time. I was beaten to death by my husband many a times. I started taking the financial responsibilities of my house and raised my children.”

From her story we could sense the toxic lived experiences of a woman who is in constant struggle with herself. Talcott Parson in his classic text “The Social Structure of the Family” (1959) speaks about a family's importance to keep a person stable. Family members give each other care and support like a warm bath. But in this case the woman hardly has her family's support, as she said “My children are ashamed of me because I cook for people.” Parson's (1937) argued that as female plays the ‘expressive role’ in the family, she is supposed to play the child caring role as women are effectively more attached to their families. According to Symbolic Interactionist, the meanings attached to symbols are socially constructed and not natural but fluid. Which means it is possible to alter or amend the gender roles which are created by society.

<sup>2</sup> Eagly, Alice H. and Wood, Wendy. (2012). Social Role Theory

<sup>3</sup> How the caregiver role disproportionately burdens women, Anil Patel, Published on: 28 Mar, 2018



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### The Fear of Social Distancing: A double pandemic

During the time of interview when asked about the health condition of the respondent she expressed her inner grief while narrating her experience of COVID sufferings. She has to take leave of 2 months from her only work which means no salary. As she speaks, “Yes, I am unfortunate enough to diagnose with COVID-19 Infection along with jaundice. Somehow, we could settle ourselves after all the distress of my husband’s death, shifting houses, losing jobs. There was no income source in the house. My children ate only one meal for a day.” She continues “None of my relatives visited my home during my absence. Although I have recovered now, I prefer to stay away from people as I feel people are hesitant to come near me.”

Soumyajit Patra in his essay “The COVID-19 Pandemic and a new sociology of social distancing” discusses how individuals have become vulnerable in intimate & personal distance. An all-pervasive fear has internalized in our minds for the possibilities of being affected by it. Fear, an emotion, in this pandemic is playing the dominant role. “Hesitation” revolves around human interaction now. Thus, these everyday affairs of keeping distance are acting as a double pandemic for woman like the respondent.

### Conclusion

Functionalists argue that gender roles have its origin before the pre industrial era when men took care of responsibilities outside of home and women took care of domestic responsibilities and these roles were passed on to subsequent generations. Alice Eagly (1987) mentions how men and women were judged by how well they conform to traditional stereotypes by marking women’s Caregiving role as standards of femininity. Through the in-depth study of lives of a single woman who has been labeled as the ‘dominant aggressive woman’ we can highlight the fluidity of the idealized gender role construction of society. Although she is the predominant provider of informal care to the family, she has to play multiple roles of being a breadwinner, financial, moral supporter to her children’s. The world is indeed shifting but this pandemic is giving a hard time to these women in playing the role of care givers.

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