

## **Anxiety, Trauma and Gender Equality During the Pandemic: A Saudi Arabian perspective**

**By**

**Nusra Mehtab**  
King Khalid University

**Sufia Sultana**  
King Khalid University

**Richa Rastogi**  
King Khalid University

### **Abstract**

The COVID 19 and its economic fallout made a severe regressive effect globally on gender equality as women experienced greater job losses due to lockdowns, business closures and industry shutdowns. On the home front, with schools closed indefinitely, women shouldered a larger burden of unpaid domestic duties, and faced a greater risk of domestic violence. Globally during the pandemic, therefore, a gender-regressive scenario was witnessed with women's jobs becoming more vulnerable giving rise to inequality. As a result, women experienced anxiety and trauma failing to cope up with the socio-economic issues. However, the situation in Saudi Arabia was slightly different from the rest of the world. This paper examined the global gender-based inequality, seemingly 'institutionalized in the labor market, and the impact of pandemic on women's wages and their job security; and compared it with the Saudi Arabia, which offered a more positive scenario. This paper takes the initiative to search for new directions towards workplace gender equality through institutional responses as well as government policies, with respect to Saudi Arabia. The findings show that COVID-19 gave an opportunity to rethink about the issue of gender equality and women's contribution in the socio-economic development, which depends on optimum leverage of the potential of all manpower, irrespective of gender differences. The study implies that despite the COVID-19 pandemic disruption, government policies and regulations can be directed towards promotion of women empowerment, supporting a gender-balanced society, and thus achieving the sustainable development goal of gender equality.

**Keywords:** Saudi vision 2030, gender regression, labor market, SDGs

### **Introduction**

The highly debated issue of gender equality has not been resolved in any country despite incessant efforts made by feminist organizations, human rights activities, women NGOs and a few individual feminist scholars (Cooper et al., 2021). The major obstacle in gender equality has been lack of economic opportunities and little political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2021). It is not only visible in the gender pay gap but also in discrimination made in the nature of work to be assigned to men and women (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2007). Despite the enforcement of a few regulations and the government policy of promoting female employment, the gender inequality has continued unstated, explicit in the declining female employment (Whitehouse and Smith, 2020). The so called 'feminized work sectors' have only low quality jobs and inhuman working conditions, which has further exacerbated the gender gaps and enlarged inequalities (Cooper et al., 2021; Cooper et al.,

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2020). Many institutions have also shown disregard to the UN mandated sustainable development Goals (SDG) Number 5 which emphasize upon gender equality at local and international levels (Kuncic, 2021; Almutairi, 2020).

The gender inequality and issues related to women employment posed a more serious threat during the pandemic. In addition to the overburdened, unpaid domestic duties, and greater risk of domestic violence (Boxall et al., 2020; Craig and Churchill, 2020; Foley and Williamson, 2021; Hill, 2020), there was also seen a disproportionate exposure of women employees in many organizations to more hazardous jobs. The women employees were exposed to high risk tasks as frontline workers in several occupations in health and social work sectors. Globally, as per an estimate, 70 percent of health workforce comprised women who worked mostly as frontline health workers like nurses, midwives and community health workers. Most of the health facility service-staff like cleaners, laundry workers and catering helpers during the COVID-19 were also women (UN Women Policy Brief, 2020). The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020) estimates that women hold 78 percent of all hospital jobs, 70 percent of pharmacy jobs and 51 percent of grocery store roles. All these data indicate that the women were more likely to be exposed to the virus (Boniol et al., 2019), which can be attributed to the gender inequality that already existed in society prior to the pandemic.

Most women also experienced greater loss of employment due to business closures and lockdowns as compared to men (Foley & Williamson, 2021; Hill, 2020). In Australia alone, within few months of the pandemic, more than 800,000 workers had lost their jobs, with women being 54% of that number (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a). There was a huge drop in their working hours and salaries as well (10.8% drop) as compared to men (7.5%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). This eventually resulted in a higher underutilization rate of 21% for women, compared to 19% for men, due to unemployment and underemployment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021c; Birch & Preston, 2021). Thus the pandemic had significant long-term consequences and compounded the gender inequalities.

Such a socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 on women also caused severe psychological disorders such as fear, anxiety, insomnia, denial, anger, depressive symptoms and other traumatic emotional experiences (Trnka & Lorencova, 2020; Torales et al., 2020). The major reason for triggering such psychological disorders were forced quarantine and isolation, lockdowns and similar other restrictions. In the studies published during the pandemic, the emotional, psychological and physical trauma in women was mostly attributed to pregnant women (López-Morales et al., 2020; Kajdy et al., 2020) or those women who suffered from depression and schizophrenia due to domestic violence and loss of employment (Spinola et al., 2020) and became more vulnerable due to the pandemic.

The situation in Saudi Arabia was however slightly different from the rest of the world. In 2005, though Saudi Arabia was ranked 153 out of 163 countries in terms of gender inequality (UNDP Gender Inequality Index, 2005; Permanyer, 2013); however, within a span of 12 years, the country introduced many positive reforms towards women empowerment and gender equality such as, allowing women to vote and run in municipal elections, permitting female athletes to participate in the Olympics, eliminating discrimination based on gender in employment, introducing pension equality and equalizing retirement ages with men, and so on. In 2013, thirty women were nominated to the previously all-male Shura Consultative Council; in 2015, twenty women were elected to municipal positions in local elections; and in September 2017, the ban on women driving was formally lifted (GASTAT, 2020). In last one decade, there are more number of Saudi women holding managerial

positions and corporate leadership jobs. As a result, it now ranks 48 out of 163 countries with a score more than half a point better than the global average.

Due to its significant gains in gender equality, Saudi Arabia also improved its positive peace index by overall 14% since 2005. The World Bank report “Women, Business, and the Law 2020” recognized Saudi Arabia as the top reformer globally for advancing women’s economic participation and encouraging women’s entrepreneurship by prohibiting gender-based discrimination in financial services. Owing to these reformatory measures, the COVID impact was not that much severe on Saudi women as compared to the global situation. The crisis, however, did affect the reformatory process and the progress which the country had made in the last one decade was slowed down (Alvaredo et al., 2018).

The country also underwent psychological distress during the pandemic from the perspective of women (Al-Hanawi et al., 2020; Alkhamees et al., 2020; Elhessewi, et al., 2021). The pandemic posed serious challenges to the implementation of gendered reforms that were taking place in Saudi Arabia and once again disturbed the quality of life enjoyed by the women prior to the pandemic (Algahtani et al., 2021). The preventive measures such as curfews, quarantine, and lockdowns implemented by the Saudi government were strict with high penalties and punishments. This resulted in high distress for the population, including women. However, Saudi government did not make any gender discrimination in providing health workers with adequate protective equipment nor in allotment of the preventive tasks. The government also ensured that all men and women continue to receive a minimum wage during the pandemic and also get equal access to educational facilities, health, and medical assistance (Rahman, 2020).

The government also announced 30% discount on utility bills in all manufacturing and agricultural sectors. Restrictions were imposed doing all kind of dismissals from jobs, which protected people’s employment during the crisis. All companies benefitting from any kind of government subsidies were under the mandate not to terminate their employees’ contracts on grounds of a force majeure. Such measures particularly assisted women, whose jobs were more likely to be affected by lay-offs during crises. As the government aid, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, Saudi Arabia also allocated SAR 500 million (USD 133 million) to the Saudi Fund for Development to help people struggling with the impact of the COVID, which benefitted mainly the elderly, widows, disabled people, families of prisoners and divorced women ((GASTAT, 2020; Amran et al., 2020).

The current study aimed to explore the gender inequality in socio-economic terms, but also discuss the psychiatric problems of anxiety, trauma and other related disorders that are seen as the impact of gender inequality. A few issues were hypothesized in this study namely, first, that anxiety and psychological trauma among women during the pandemic were caused due to greater gender inequality; second, the women workers were more exposed to the COVID related services, thus were susceptible and vulnerable to the disease and that resulted in higher levels of anxiety and trauma. Third, it was also hypothesized that gendered inequalities also affected the labor market and indirectly affected the global economy. Last, but not the least, the study presented how Saudi Arabia reacted to the pandemic without any gender discrimination or violation of rights of employment and opportunities. The main premise of the study was that, despite crises and pandemics, government and business organizations are capable of establishing new directions in workplace gender equality as well as at improving conditions at social and domestic fronts, thus capable to mitigate anxiety and trauma to a greater extent. Like the Saudi government, globally such efforts could be made

to cope up with the pandemic. Such government policies and regulations could be formulated to enhance women employment and create a gender-balanced society.

## **Problem statement**

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed gender inequality and a disproportional division of work, where often women were pushed into more vulnerable jobs, and disproportionately exposed to the virus at work. In Australia, for instance, women workers who risked their lives in front line jobs in hospitals, childhood care centers, and other essential services, accounted for 88% as registered nurses and midwives, 85% as aged care workers, 96% as early childhood educators and 55% of retail and food and accommodation services workers in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020; Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2020). In the United States, this disproportionate representation was more acute, where women accounted for about one-half of all workers in the United States in 2020, but comprised nearly two-thirds (64.4%) of frontline workers, of which 41.2% were from non-white backgrounds (Rho et al., 2020). Many of these women held low-wage jobs and were forced to continue working despite the fear of contracting COVID-19.

Additionally, women also experienced greater job losses in industries most affected by lockdowns and business closures. In Australia, for example, during the first phase of the pandemic, women accounted 54% of 800,000 workers who lost their jobs (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a). In sectors like hospitality, retail, accommodation and food services, where there was over-representation of women, they experienced greater drops in their working hours and wages as compared to men (10.8% drop compared to 7.5% for men) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). On the home front too, women spent two hours per day more than men on unpaid domestic duties like child care and experienced greater risk of domestic violence (Boxall et al., 2020; Cooper and Mosseri, 2020; Craig and Churchill, 2020; Foley and Williamson, 2021; Hill, 2020; OECD, 2021). Similar results were evident in the United States where women accounted for 55% of loss of employment during the first phase of the pandemic (Ewing-Nelson, 2020). This loss was much greater for women with children whose, according to a US Population Survey, working hours were reduced by four to five times more than men (Collins et al. 2021).

As a result of such a chronic gender inequality, disproportionate participation in labor force, uneven wages, unpaid care work and sexual violence, the threat of a gender-regressive scenario was looming everywhere and demanded serious and quick actions. It was estimated that if such a situation was allowed to continue, the global GDP growth could be \$1 trillion lower in 2030. This scenario could be more severe if factors such as attitudinal bias and lesser expenditure on services for women education or childcare were allowed to continue. Such a scenario would force women to leave the labor market permanently, thus indirectly hitting the global economy. It was therefore necessary to take steps towards gender equality and help millions of women globally to contribute to economic growth. The governments across the globe need to address the issue of gender-based inequality, which is facing the risk of being 'institutionalized in the labor market' (Wajcman, 2000: 184), as is witnessed gender-based labor market segregations as well as discrimination.

In addition to the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19, women also faced the risk of psychological illnesses like insomnia, denial, depressive symptoms and other traumatic emotional experiences, caused due to the fear, anxiety and trauma (Trnka & Lorencova, 2020; Torales, et al., 2020). These psychological disorders were further triggered

due to lockdowns and government mandated restrictions. Most women also suffered due to domestic violence during this period. Although it seems the worst effects of the pandemic are over now, as schools and other education institutions have fully reopened and businesses are returning to new normal, the pandemic however has exposed the vulnerabilities and gender inequalities, and also the potential threat to the global economy due to the gender-regressive scenario. A few questions arise: Do we need to re-evaluate the situation and accept the value of women participation in all types of industries and businesses? Will we accept that fewer women's employment and lesser labor force participation can potentially give rise to inequalities globally? What can be done to mitigate the anxiety and trauma experienced by women as they fail to cope up with the socio-economic issues? There is a need for a paradigm shift in bringing gender equality through state interventions, formulating regulations for better wages and improvement in work conditions and, above all, instilling public cooperation to eradicate gender inequality from the society.

Several studies have uncovered the psychological effects of COVID-19 with the Saudi Arabian perspective, but they have focused on general public (Joseph et al., 2021) and healthcare workers (Alenazi et al., 2021). There is a dearth of studies on women and children, who were the most vulnerable populations at the time of the pandemic (Vora, 2020); therefore, there was scant empirical evidence documenting the effects of the pandemic on women, with the Saudi Arabian perspective. Even the studies that discussed the impact of COVID-19 on women took a more general approach, rather than a gendered approach, in addressing the pandemic issues related to women (Burki, 2020).

This study therefore addressed this gap and investigated the challenges faced by women such as anxiety, trauma and gender inequality during the pandemic with the Saudi Arabian perspective. The Saudi Arabia emerged as a compelling case to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on women due to several reasons. First, the country has always been targeted for inequalities between men and women and gender discrimination, violence against women and unequal wages and opportunities. Secondly, the country had put stringent measures in the form of curfews, quarantine and lockdowns during the pandemic, which had resulted in serious distress among the people, including women. Thirdly, a few studies were showing that women faced a higher level of psychological distress than men (Alkhamees, 2020; Al-Hanawi et al., 2020; Algahtani et al., 2021), which needed to be verified. Such a context had therefore necessitated to study the psychological distress among the women in Saudi Arabia.

## Literature review

- **COVID-19: A traumatic era**

Wang (2020) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the posttraumatic stress, depression, and anxiety, that resulted out of COVID-19 in China. Though the study observed a gradual reduction in the intensity of pandemic related trauma, but the traumatic aftermath was still significantly very high. A similar meta-analysis (Robinson et al., 2020) surveyed longitudinal studies dealing with trauma and stress in the pandemic era, and found significant increase in mental symptomatology, which was evident in symptoms of anxiety and very high emotional dysfunctions. The study did report a gradual lessening of the trauma and the feeling of loneliness, as people got adapted to the pandemic may but it was not completely abolished and hinted at emotional negativity.

COVID-19phobia resulted in high paranoia, stress, depression, and dysfunctional behavior in the general population (Fernández et al., 2020; Hao et al., 2020). The trauma related to loneliness was much among the unemployed and unmarried individuals (Bu F & Fancourt, 2020); the psychological distress was higher among females, college students, and the young unemployed ones (González et al., 2020; Fernández et al., 2020). Studies (Xiong et al., 2020) have revealed that psychiatric illnesses leading to stress and trauma were the key risk factors during COVID-19; some of which even included insomnia, suicidal intentions, anxiety and depression syndromes, and dysfunctional eating (Vindegaard, 2020; Hao, 2020). Some patients even reported schizophrenia (Lynch et al., 2021) and depressive mental disorders (Mehra et al., 2020). In short, there is no dearth of studies on stress, anxiety and post traumatic illnesses caused by COVID-19 era. The current study attempts to relate these disorders with gender inequality and gender-related crimes during the pandemic era, a topic not much dwelt upon.

- ***The impact of COVID-19 on women***

Even prior to the pandemic, women suffered due to inflexible workplaces (Williams, 2000), discriminatory norms which restricted women's equal participation in the labor market (Charlesworth et al., 2011), and put at stake their socio-economic security, and harmonious family life (Pocock, 2005). Besides, women quality time was also much affected by the unpaid work on the domestic front like child care, care of elders and other domestic chores, due to which they were forced to accept lower-paid jobs, and rigid employment conditions. Such disproportionate labor norms pushed their career growth much behind that of men (Tomlinson et al., 2018). This gender gap and disproportionate unpaid work at home widened during the pandemic, since schools and day care centers closed indefinitely, and the amount of time spent at home had increased for both parents, but the mothers still followed the pre-pandemic patterns and consistently spent more time on unpaid work at home (Craig & Churchill, 2020).

In the United States, studies (Petts et al., 2020) have reported that during the pandemic, it was mothers who faced a greater risk of unemployment (due to unpaid care work at home) while fathers' employment was unaffected. Studies conducted in the United Kingdom, too, reported that mothers performed the majority of unpaid housework and childcare tasks during the pandemic (Profeta, 2020a; Profeta, 2020b; Alon et al., 2020). A few studies, however, reported that fathers were involved in domestic jobs more than before the pandemic (Chung et al., 2021; Sevilla and Smith, 2020), as some employers allowed flexible working hours for married men, and even sanctioned paternity leaves for fathers during the first year of birth of a child.

Such socially disruptive gender inequality entered into its ugly phase when gender-based violence increased soon after lockdowns were declared, exposing the risks and vulnerabilities of the women (Arenas-Arroyo et al., 2020; Boserup et al., 2020; Mittal and Singh, 2020; UN Women, 2020). Boxall et al. (2020) conducted a survey of 15,000 women during May 2020 and found that, due to financial stress and social isolation, a lot of respondents experienced physical or sexual violence during the pandemic. It was more aggravating to see that economic instability was caused by unemployment or loss of job or lowering of wages mostly among women employees during the pandemic (Beland et al., 2020; Morgan & Boxall, 2020). The situation in most countries worsened because of the absence of the required regulatory framework that would protect the rights of the women.

- ***Workplace gender equality: Solutions***

A few authors like Warren (2021) believed that the COVID-19 exposed the inequalities in the employment scenario and gave an opportunity to rebuild and restore trust within genders and work harmoniously at workplace, practicing ‘work–life balance, particularly by women. If such a thing happened, it was much easier to cope up with challenges like financial insecurity and underemployment of both men and women. Warren (2021) also argues that such a flexibility will empower the working class to create a more balanced employment culture. Talking about the solutions to the gender inequality, a special mention can be made of two studies: first, Kirton (2021), which shares how the workers’ union action can help achieve gender equality at work place; and second, Proctor-Thomson et al. (2021), which also proposed that workers’ unions should bargain gender equality as a part of their flexible working demands.

Besides, there are several studies that have addressed gender-based labor market segregations and discrimination both pre and post pandemic (Profeta,2020a; Profeta, 2020b; Alon et al., 2020; Westcott,2021; Cooper et al., 2020; Foley et al., 2020), confronted gender-based violence and sexual harassment at work places (Weatherall et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2021; Craig and Churchill, 2020; Sevilla and Smith, 2020; Ferrier,2021; Nally,2021), and have advocated and optimistically predicted a more gender-equitable post-pandemic labor market promoting feminized work sectors such as education, health and welfare services (Macdonald & Charlesworth, 2021) and a flexible employment relationships in both genders (Birch & Preston, 2021).

## **Methodology**

The data for this study was collected through a randomized, comparative observation of the global versus Saudi Arabian and prospective versus retrospective scenario of gender inequality and how it was exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Comparative studies commonly take place to analyze differences between groups and individual units, which may differ in their size and geographical expansion, composition, structure in a given time (Lau & Holbrook, 2017). The comparisons are made to determine whether any significant differences exist for some predefined measures between groups and individuals (Friedman and Wyatt (2006). Moreover, such comparative studies adopt an objective approach to define and measure variables for the sake of comparison or to prove or disprove a hypothesis. The current study is based on the hypothesis that during the COVID-19, when the world was experiencing extreme gender inequality, the Saudi government was taking reformatory measures to bring gender equality and women empowerment in both public and private sectors. Through educational measures, several programs were carried out to create awareness about gender equality, which further lessened the incident of domestic violence and sexual harassment in social and home circles.

The data for this study was collected through a cross-sectional semi structured and open-ended survey which examined the issue of gender inequality, domestic violence, sexual harassment in Saudi Arabia and the whether COVID-19 made any adverse impact on the psychological health of women, resulting in stress and trauma. The participants of the study comprised women groups, in both private and public sectors, university faculty and house wives. The sample was identified using the purpose sampling technique. The survey was made available in both languages, Arabic and English, where the English version was translated into Arabic by a native Arabic faculty member and then back translated into English by another native Arabic faculty to ensure the content did not change. Prior to

administering the survey, all participants over the age of 18 years and Saudi citizens, signed informed consent. They were explained the objective of the study, that their participation was voluntary and that they could leave the survey at any time without the need to explain the reason. It was also assured that the findings of the study and their identity would remain anonymous and confidential. Globally, the data was collected through studies and health reports published by WHO, UN and various other agencies. The focus was on studies published during the period of pandemic as well as data from public and private organizations.

The data collected was analyzed through a qualitative content analysis which resulted in themes and constructs that were used to build up this study. It was felt that the study required a blend of socio-economic and psychological issues being faced by women both at home and at work places and within their families. In conclusion, this research attempted an inquiry into the subject of gender inequality in Saudi Arabia and contrasted it with the global scenario, with the view to examine the extent to which the psychological health, social life and global economy can be affected by gender discrimination.

## **Results and discussion**

The COVID pandemic proved to be not just a health crisis, but also an economic one, severely hitting the labor markets globally. The pandemic also exposed several harsh realities, one of which was a pre-existing gender inequality. It exposed that women were more vulnerable to social, economic and health risks as evident of gender inequalities. The women received a disproportionate treatment as they were involved in increased hard work and childcare burden, which remain uncompensated, though the pandemic did offer a good opportunity for change in equitable distribution of household and childcare tasks between the two parents, so that women could participate in the labor market, but it was not much utilized, particularly because the gender inequality is a more serious issue in countries where women play very conservative roles and where the socio-cultural biases do not promote gender equality. In such a state of affairs, it is liable to end up with anxiety, stress and other psychological disorders.

Talking of the labor market in the pre-post pandemic scenarios, a fact that cannot be ignored is that there existed gender inequality globally, despite the increased education among women. For instance, there existed a gender gap in education when one finds women less represented in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) disciplines, and thus finding less exposure in the labor market (Profeta, 2020a), and a major cause of female unemployment in most countries. Moreover, there are fewer women employed in sectors like manufacturing, construction, etc. which further exacerbated gender inequality and a disproportionate work employment. The most common work sectors for women employment have been the service sectors like hospitality, retail, home care and domestic work, sectors which were most affected during the pandemic as lockdowns and social distancing halted the activities in these sectors, resulting in what is termed as “she-cession” or recession among the women (Alon et al., 2020).

The impact of the pandemic was much greater in women as most women lost their jobs as compared to men, which visibly increased the risk of economic backwardness and poverty mostly among older and single women (Del Boca et al., 2020). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath in the form of mandatory lockdown and closure of schools produced additional burden on parents, but this burden was not equally shared and



had rather fallen mainly on women in the family, who spent two hours per day more than men on unpaid work at home (OECD, 2021). As an estimate, in countries like Italy, UK, US, France and Spain, in the first wave of the pandemic, 44% of women and 30% of men worked from home, a gap which remained during the second wave of the pandemic (24% versus 15%). Apart from their work, women spent more time at home in child care and other domestic chores (2.52 to 3.00 hours as compared to 1.26 to 1.57 of men) (Biroli et al., 2020; Farré et al., 2020; Sevilla and Smith, 2020).

Prior to pandemic, women occupied 39 percent of global employment but were subjected to 54 percent of loss of employment during the pandemic (Sevilla and Smith, 2020), thus a regressive effect on gender equality was clearly visible. Though in most cases, men and women work in different sectors, women's jobs proved 1.8 times more vulnerable than men's jobs during the pandemic, besides the additional burden of unpaid child care and domestic chores, which are disproportionately carried only by women. In such a gender-regressive scenario, where women bear additional childcare burdens, suffer the attitudinal bias, and are subjected to discrimination in public and private opportunities in education and labor market, as mentioned earlier, the global economy would suffer drastically, estimating global GDP growth falling \$1 trillion lower in 2030.

McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) carried out a project entitled Power of Parity and identified four categories to achieve gender-equality namely: equality in work and essential services; equal economic opportunities; legal protection and political voice; and physical security and autonomy (Sander, & Keller, 2021). The MGI suggested a Gender Parity Score, or GPS, by using these categories as indicators, and strongly concluded that gender equality cannot be achieved without unifying all four categories. Without a proper merger of these indicators, any tangible progress toward gender parity in unthinkable and gender gaps shall remain globally. The MGI also reiterated the risk of a reverse progress of the global economy if the disproportionate behavior shown towards women during COVID-19 continues. MGI even calculated that the value of unpaid-care work done by women on the domestic front, which amounts to \$10 trillion, or 13 percent of global GDP. The only solution lies in redressing the gender balance by bringing social and economic reforms through women empowerment and other non-discriminatory policies for gender equality (Sander, & Keller, 2021).

A close observation of the prevailing condition and documentation survey of archived UN and WHO reports revealed that there is great variation in the manner how countries address the problem of gender inequality, particularly because each country has to tailor their gender policies to the national context. Besides, the role of stakeholders such as NGOs, government bodies, women organizations, and like is also significant as they can contribute to reducing the gender imbalance through interventions at their respective levels. The major interventions include such incentivized programs like employer-or state-funded childcare, liberal tax policies for working women, flexible work hours, and lenient performance reviews and promotions. In addition, there can be financing support from banks and other financial organizations to individuals or to develop social-services infrastructure. In order to intensify labor-market, digitally delivered services can also be started with women entrepreneurs, though they need to be provided identifications for digital access. Currently, women are also disadvantaged, as they disproportionately lack the digital access in the absence of an identification. MGI also reported that 45 percent of women over the age of 15 years lacked identification in low-income countries, compared with only 30 percent of men (Sander, & Keller, 2021). This inequality can however be resolved by business leaders and policy makers

who can build new digital infrastructure to improve women's digital literacy, and facilitate women's access to mobile phones and internet based programs. More inclusive digital-ID systems can be introduced with simple registration processes. Employers should also come forward with equal opportunities recruitment procedures to promote gender equality.

The pandemic exposed the asymmetric and disproportionate distribution of work between men and women, which became more enormous as the impact of pandemic deepened. A need is now felt to reduce this gender discrimination and several organizations should come forward with highly incentivized schemes leading to gender equality and women's empowerment, especially for those women who hold strategic positions and hold full jobs. These schemes should include not only equal wages and equal opportunities of employment, but also additional perks and incentives during pregnancy, for both the parents. Such a step, it is believed, will lead to economic growth and sustainable development and optimum utilization of talent (Fanelli & Profeta, 2021). It is now believed, when the world is recovering from the pandemic that investment in gender equality would lead to higher GDP and increase in human capital to promote a sustainable society (Profeta, 2020a). This echoes one of the sustainable goals set out by the UN, namely goal number five, "to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" as the most essential prerequisite to establish a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world.

The trauma, fear and anxiety that engulf the women across the globe can be addressed by removing the attitudinal biases. The male chauvinistic attitude that arouses men to involve in domestic violence and sexual harassment can be eliminated by developing a positive image of women in society. Once again governments and other stakeholders can run awareness campaigns encouraging males to accept that the presence of women at work ensures socially and economically progressive society. A positive environment can be built up if there are measures adopted to safeguard girls' education, check domestic violence strictly, and protect maternal health. It is necessary to understand the linkage between the social and professional roles of women and the country's economic growth.

There is clear evidence that women participation in socio-economic, educational and health fronts in Saudi Arabia increased even during the pandemic (Omair et al., 2020). Economically, it would take a little more time to reduce the gaps and Saudi labor market to create jobs compatible to the females. On the social front, during the pandemic, it was found that 85% of Saudi women had subscribed to at least one type of social media and 97% of Saudi women had extended support to one or other social cause. Despite the patriarchal type of society, 26% of Saudi families are headed by women or partially supported financially by women (Omair et al., 2020). In education, the female enrolment rates in schools and universities are much higher than males and also the male-female graduation ratio is 47/53. Finally, on health front, too, 26% of females and 23% of males have access to regular health examination. The overall mortality rates are also smaller for women (2.2%) than males (2.5%).

Several reformatory measures have been introduced in Saudi Arabia during the last 5 years, like lifting off the driving ban on women; allowing them to travel alone without a male companion, obtaining a passport without the permission of male guardians, registering their marriages, divorces, and children's births, regulating equal pay between genders, and enjoying the right to work or participate in games like athletics without facing any kind of discrimination. Saudi Arabia has also banned marriages under 18 years of age regardless of gender. It has also allowed full and equal access to laws and regulations related to sexual and

reproductive health care, information and education on HIV. Women also have assumed many leadership positions in both Shura Council and corporate.

There are several other initiatives that show the Saudi government's determination to facilitate women participation in national development. This includes creation of more than 450,000 new jobs for women, setting up a National Women's Observatory, and an electronic job platform exclusively for women to educate them about the qualification mechanism and labor market conditions. For women entrepreneurs, there are social insurance schemes, productivity projects, and support services, like *Wusool* and *Qurra* and training programs like *Doroob* for women to acquire workplace skills (GASTAT, 2020). These initiatives have consolidated the Saudi National Transformation Program 2020 and have paved a strong path to implement Vision 2030. These initiatives also hint at the integrated governance model of the Saudi government that aims at bringing women in the mainstream, socially and economically. Internationally, agencies like the UN are also working with Saudi government under Saudi Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Programs, to build a Strategic Framework, in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which also stress for gender equality among other goals.

## Conclusion

The current research makes one thing very clear that the greater is the gender equality, the better will be the country's economy and the greater harmony will prevail in society. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the gender inequality and forced the researchers to raise critically significant questions such as how to remove barriers for female participation in labor-force allowing them to play a big role in the society; how to pave the path to economic and social benefits through women empowerment and by honing their skills and competences in multiple disciplines; and how to bring gender parity and construct a potential pathway for the economic growth. This study highlights at least five indicators that are crucial to achieving workplace gender equality namely: reducing gender-based labor market segregations and discrimination; bringing flexibility in work time and access to resources that empower women; building a more gender-equitable distribution of unpaid care; mitigating gender-based violence both at home and at work; and creating a social awareness towards gender equality. A strong message that emerges from the current research is that the governments and business organizations can facilitate gender equality and restrict the growing gender-regressive trends.

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