



# Sushruta Journal of Health Policy & Opinion

## OPINION

# Why is standing up for women's equality still relevant in 2021

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## ARTICLE INFORMATION

### *Article history:*

Submitted: 05 04 2021

Final Version: 05 04 2021

### *Digital Object Identifier:*

<https://doi.org/10.38192/14.1.15>

### *Keywords:*

Equality, Women's rights, Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

It is 2021. The world is reeling from the ravages of a merciless pandemic that knew no borders and killed at will. When scientific collaboration, market forces and societal will resulted in the creation, testing, approval and deployment of multiple vaccines that may yet stop the virus in its tracks. Where most were forced to live apart, and yet joined up like never before.

And yet, it has been a year where the privileges of a few were starkly overshadowed by the destitution of many. A year where inherent societal inequalities in many nations were held in sharp focus. Where the poor and disadvantaged were much more likely to be infected and die of the virus, and where untreated premorbid conditions hastened their demise. Many governments used the necessary restrictions of civil liberties to their advantage, and many congregated to protest.

Where do women feature in this? The author explores the impact of inequalities on women and why women do need to stand up for equality and justice, now more than ever before.

## INTRODUCTION

It is 2021. The world is reeling from the ravages of a merciless pandemic that knew no borders and killed at will. When scientific collaboration, market forces and societal will resulted in the creation, testing, approval and deployment of multiple vaccines that may yet stop the virus in its tracks. Where most were forced to live apart, and yet joined up like never before.

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## WHERE DO WOMEN FIT IN ALL THIS?

Against all odds, and fighting many deeply entrenched prejudices, many women have emerged as leading lights in their fields. The Oxford/Astra-Zeneca vaccine was developed by a team led by a woman<sup>1</sup>, countries led by women reportedly fared better during the pandemic<sup>2</sup>, a woman with Indian and African ancestry created history and helped oust a divisive American leader.

## HOW ABOUT ORDINARY WOMEN?

While such powerful women rightfully deserve every accolade they receive, countless reports suggest that ordinary women have faced disproportionate amounts of hardships during the pandemic year. During lockdowns, women have undertaken the



greater share of household chores and childcare or home-schooling duties due to established gender-based domestic roles<sup>3</sup>. Women academics, particularly early-career ones, published far less and received far fewer grants due to personal demands on their time<sup>4</sup>. Women have been subject to more redundancies and joblessness, owing to the disproportionate number of women serving in low-skill, low paid and informal jobs<sup>5</sup>. Women have given birth and suffered miscarriages in isolation<sup>6</sup>, were less able to participate in leisure and self-improvement activities, were less likely to job-seek when restrictions were lifted<sup>7</sup>, become poor and more dependent on their partners' incomes, all the while suffering a greater rise in the proportion of unpaid household work that inevitably increased during the pandemic.

Internationally, displaced people or those from war-torn areas have been dealt a particularly harsh blow during the pandemic. None have faced the injustices more starkly than women. Women refugees have been hit with a 'triple crisis': the challenges of COVID-19, displacement, and gender-based violence<sup>8</sup>.

Data from the USA indicate that one in four women and one in 10 men experience intimate partner violence<sup>9</sup>. During the pandemic, not only has the opportunity to perpetrate violence increased due to lockdowns, the access to help for victims has declined significantly. With job losses affecting women disproportionately, this has also resulted in more women trapped in abusive relationship with little hope of escape or support<sup>10</sup>.

Women have traditionally been poorly represented in clinical research<sup>11</sup>. It is of concern that this too might be the case in COVID-19 research. Women appear to have better outcomes than men in surviving severe COVID-19 but suffer proportionally more with symptoms of long COVID<sup>12</sup>. It is therefore important to understand the socio-economic and health impacts of the pandemic not merely in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, but also in the long term.

## WHY DO WOMEN NEED EQUAL REPRESENTATION IN SOCIETY?

Despite decades of progress, women continue to occupy fewer positions of power. UN Data<sup>13</sup> show that only one in four women occupy parliamentary seats in democratic nations worldwide. Out of the 500 chief executives leading the highest-grossing firms, just under seven per cent are women, only 53 out of 900 Nobel Prize winners are women, 37% of traditional news and 26 % of digital news is reported by women, and only one woman in the entire 92-year history of the Oscars has won the Best Director prize. Although women carry the most burden of domestic cooking, just under four per cent of chefs with three Michelin stars from the prominent restaurant guide are women.

Societies with higher female rights are more prosperous and peaceful<sup>14</sup>. Corporate boards that include women are more likely to exercise a beneficial, moderating influence on male CEOs and one study showed that having at least one female director on the board was associated with less aggressive investment policies, better acquisition decisions, and ultimately improved firm performance in these industries<sup>15</sup>.

Female-led grassroots movements in politics or civil society result in widespread social change, economic prosperity and environmental gains<sup>16</sup>. Women's representation in local governments has made a difference. Research on panchayats (local councils) in India discovered that the number of drinking water projects in areas with female-led councils was 62 per cent higher than in those with male-led councils<sup>17</sup>. In Norway, a direct causal relationship between the presence of women in municipal councils and childcare coverage was found<sup>18</sup>.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE GENDER BALANCE IN THE WORKPLACE AND WIDER SOCIETAL LEADERSHIP ROLES?

Many countries have constitutionally protected affirmative action or reservation policies in employment and education with the purpose of allowing better opportunities to historically marginalised groups. This has resulted in some betterment in representation but has often resulted in stigmatisation or isolation of those admitted to such positions. At times, these provisions have stood in direct opposition to legally protected equality laws, particularly in the eyes of those groups that stand to lose out on such appointments.

However, in places where quotas were imposed to improve female representation, for example in Norway where a 40% share of representation in boardrooms was mandated by government, after an initial period of unhappiness, most industries found that female board members increased profitability of their businesses<sup>19</sup>. When affirmative action is not mandated, 'positive action' in getting better female representation is helpful. This begins with enabling more women to have access to training opportunities to apply to higher paid jobs, providing supporting maternity benefits, widening recruitment pools to a more diverse work force and supporting culture change within organisations that allows a wider view of leadership.

The 2011 UN General Assembly resolution on women's political participation notes, "Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women" and urges Nation States to implement measures that improves access and remove barriers to equal participation in the political sphere. Several countries worldwide have introduced quotas for female representation in politics; for example, a 1993 constitutional amendment in India introduced a 30% mandated female representation in village and district council elections. It appears that with time, this produces benefits. Data from India's West Bengal state show that when women's political candidacy increases, young girls are more likely to view themselves in leadership roles, but only after a village council has been headed by a woman for two consecutive terms<sup>20</sup>.

Similar corrective measures may be beneficial in other areas where female representation is poor. For example, a recent report from the UK Royal College of Surgeons indicates that in 2020 only 12% of consultant surgeons are female (an improvement from 9% in 2012) and just over a third of the surgical trainees were female



(35%) compared to 56% female trainees overall. The College has committed itself to improve diversity and inclusivity in its work and represent the interest of all its members. This is a highly commendable step and should be emulated by other Medical Royal Colleges<sup>21</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the evident benefits in a more gender- balanced representation in society, data clearly shows that progress has been painfully slow, and it may take decades to reach gender equality at its current pace<sup>19</sup>. In order to fully benefit from such representation, it is imperative that organisations support pro-active policies that ensure women are encouraged to work in

fields that are traditionally non-female, provide strong maternity rights, encourage shared parental leave and provide supportive childcare facilities.

Change has to happen at a pace that ensures that everyone benefits from a truly representative society, where the voices of many are not drowned by those of few in power. Civil society, industry, government, and educational institutions should make it their priority to commit to achieving equality and justice by taking pro-active steps to influence policy change in favour of a more diverse and inclusive society. Post-COVID-19, as economies gradually begin to open, and people return to their usual activities, it is important that the pandemic serves as a reminder of the importance of achieving a fair and equal society for all.

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