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1. INDIA ON LOCKDOWN: COVID19 & WOMEN

We have seen it time and again that crisis always exacerbates gender inequality due to the existing social structures that favours men. Women in the country today are facing the brunt of this upheaval in the wake of Coronavirus, a pandemic unprecedented. NCW was accessible amidst the lockdown to women providing all necessary help. There are some observations we learnt during the lockdown and need to keep ourselves reminded in the fight for equal rights of women:

- I. Women are considered as prime caregivers for their children; hence school closures have resulted in added stress to them. It has increased their burden and is affecting their mental health.
- II. There has been an increase in numbers of domestic violence complaints as women are confined inside homes with their abusers and it is difficult for them to access institution support such as police at times like these.
- III. Some working women are single parents and handling their work from home while also managing their family are constantly overloaded with physical and mental pressures to remain productive.
- IV. For pregnant women and mothers with newborns who may need special care are also facing difficulty in accessing health facilities at this lockdown situation.
- V. Women are predominantly the frontline workers in the form of paramedic staff. All women and men need safety equipment while at work, but there is also a need to provide uninterrupted supply of feminine hygiene products to these frontline women workers.
- VI. Migrant women workers will be worst hit financially, given that women contribute the biggest share in this unorganized sector. Therefore, the chances of them getting their wages without work during lockdown or any social security from their employers to survive the pandemic is scarce.
- VII. Sectors that can help in lowering the burden of women such as the doctors and psychologists should start online and tele-counselling to spread awareness on mental wellbeing and also publicize the message of medical resources available to women.
- VIII. The Government of India announced 1.7 Lakh Crores Relief Package that will cover 80 crores poor people including women for cash transfer and food security to survive the pandemic. Several reliefs for women are covered under Jan Dhan Yojana, Ujjwala scheme, collateral-free loan for women in self-help groups, ex-gratia for disabled and widows are in the relief package. It is the work of the state officials to ensure that these schemes are well implemented at ground level to reach all women across India. Central government has already asked State governments to transfer funds to construction workers via Direct Benefit Transfer. This highlights the importance of bank, Aadhaar linkage for women to access government services and schemes in critical times like this.



Lastly, it is important that sharing of domestic chores is shared by every member of the family for mental and physical wellbeing of women. It is a critical time for children to learn some life skills and for men to help with household chores. Responsibilities do not stop at lockdown and this is the time when gender leadership will truly begin at home. National Commission for Women did not stop working amid lockdown and we have been accessible to women in distress via emails, complaint portals and direct messages on official social media platforms and all necessary help were provided to women. National Commission for Women had only in December 2019 done a broad-based consultation on 'Women and Children in Disasters: Need for a Policy'. Compiled report and recommendations have been sent to the MWCD. Commission, however, has identified that Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies can actually become 'women and child friendly agencies' in times such as these through innovative ways and collaboration with grass root organizations.

#IndiaFightsCoronavirus #StayHomeSaveLives

2. NCW ADVISORY FOR INTERNAL WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS DURING COVID19 LOCKDOWN

National Commission for Women being the apex statutory body to work for women empowerment in the country took the onus to propose certain interventions in the form of an advisory for internal women migrant workers during COVID 19 lockdown, as they are the most adversely affected sections in the present crisis. In view of this, the Commission issued an advisory on April 7, 2020 to address the essential need of internal women migrants. The advisory had put forth guidelines related to food, health, hygiene, shelter and safety for women migrant workers in India. It was forwarded to 10 key Ministries and to Chief Secretaries of identified States and Union territories. As a precursor to this advisory, the Commission had a fruitful interaction through video conference with delegation and representatives from International Labour Organization and V.V Giri National Labour Institute that brought significant inputs for drafting of the final advisory.



3. LAUNCH OF NCW WHATSAPP HELPLINE FOR EMERGENCY RESPONSE DURING LOCKDOWN



During the period of lockdown, NCW witnessed surge in complaints received from the online portal, which then prompted the Commission to take comprehensive steps to speed up the redressal system. A WhatsApp number 72177135372 was launched on April 10, 2020 by NCW, to ease reporting of domestic violence cases on emergency basis through chats, understanding the ordeal of those who may not be able to access the online portal or call for help in front of their abusers. The Commission has constituted a special team to handle these complaints on a fast track basis considering the urgency in the matter and to provide immediate security to the survivors. These complaints received from the chats were processed and coordinated without any formal registration of cases with the Commission for immediate and prompt action. Within a weeks' time of the helpline launch, NCW had addressed 40 cases of violence against women.

4. MAHILA THANA (SPECIAL CELL FOR WOMEN) SUPPORTED BY NCW

In another effort to strengthen the network of resources for women in distress, NCW extended the support for immediate activation of Mahila Thana also known as Special Cell for Women by forming several local helpline numbers to reach out to women in emergencies. The Special Cell for Women was made functional in Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Assam and Meghalaya for the ease of filing of cases and extending help to women instantly at the wake of lockdown. The Special Cell also responded to other needs of women like counselling, providing assistance for medical aid and shelter homes for women facing violence. The helpline numbers were operational 24x7 in view of the lockdown.



5. REVIEW OF LAWS RELATING TO INTER-STATE MIGRANT WOMEN

The National Commission for Women, under section 10(1)(d) of the NCW Act, 1990, is mandated to 'review' the existing provisions of the Constitution and other laws affecting women and 'recommend' amendments thereto, so as to suggest remedial legislative measures to meet any inadequacies or shortcomings in such legislations. In pursuance to this, Commission decided to hold five Regional Consultations to review laws relating to inter-state migrant women workers in association with identified National Law Schools in India. The first Consultation was organized for the southern region in association with NLSIU Bengaluru on April 25, 2020. The Consultation was held on web-based format via NIC. The Consultation saw participation from senior government officials from State Labour Departments, Civil Society leaders working first-hand on the issue of migration, Labour Law Experts and representatives from State Women Commissions.



6. PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING OF WOMEN IN LOCKDOWN

The situation around COVID19 pandemic and the lockdown imposed to contain the spread of the virus had brought several challenges particularly for women in dealing with daily routine like home-schooling kids, work-from-home schedule, household loads, family care and while some also experienced domestic violence. With an effort to reach out to women in distress especially at times like these, NCW released a 5' minute video on 'Psychological Wellbeing Strategy' in consultation with Psychiatrists from PGIMER Chandigarh, on dealing with mental stress and wellbeing amid the lockdown period. The video advises women on various techniques to deal with stress, strategies to overcome anxiety and mental breakdown and on ways to remain positive and productive while caring for the wellbeing of themselves and their loved ones.



The mantra of 'BE POSITIVE' to fight stress

7. HAPPY TO HELP TASK FORCE FOR RELIEF TO SENIOR CITIZENS



NCW initiated a Happy To Help Task-Force on April 4 to provide relief assistance to elder/senior citizens living alone during lockdown and to help them procure essential services like medicines, groceries, and for other medical emergencies. The initiative came into being following several emails to NCW Chairperson Smt. Rekha Sharma from children living away from their old parents during the lockdown. Hence, a special email ID: helpatncw@gmail.com was created for the purpose.

By end of April, more than 100 requests from all over India including few cases from Dubai and USA were successfully facilitated by NCW task force with the help of state administration and police personnel for delivering essentials and medical assistance. The initiatives received commendable applauds from many sports personalities like Virat Kohli, PV Sindhu and well-known names from entertainment industry like Amitabh Bacchhan, Priyanka Chopra, Ajay Devgan, Ayushman Khurrana, Rituparna Sen. They supported the cause on social media through tweets thus amplifying the initiative.

8. WOMEN LEAD THE NATION AS CORONA WARRIORS

In an exemplary display of grit and determination, women corona warriors were instrumental in India's war against coronavirus. These range from women holding key position in the government health care centres as nurses and paramedic staffs to Anganwadi, ASHA workers, Self-Help-Groups to countless local social health workers in the rural areas. Their tremendous commitment and self-sacrifice by visiting every single home to educate residents on social distancing, isolation, hygiene practice and also for monitoring people for symptoms of the virus to collecting samples for COVID19 test are commendable. These workers also apprise women of support system available to them against abuse and domestic violence. In such attempt to support women in distress, the Maharashtra State Commission launched a counselling helpline number. Manipur State Commission distributed local handmade sanitizers, masks, hygiene products and ration to widows and marginal communities. Women based Self-Help-Groups across India were busy in producing homemade masks in bulk for distribution to interior masses and helping the economy. Many social workers and NGOs introduced helpline numbers that made the fight against coronavirus during lockdown a truly women-led movement by uniting for a common cause.



9. NCW CELLS UPDATE

COMPLAINTS & INVESTIGATION CELL

Month	Complaints Received	Complaints (Closed) (Old+New)
April 2020	800	800
WhatsApp	199	199

NRI CELL

Month	Complaints Received	Complaints (Closed) (Old+New)
April 2020	15	-

(SUO-MOTO) CELL

Month	Nos. of Cases Taken	ATR Received (Old+New)	Cases Closed (Old+New)
April 2020	27	5	-

10. NCW CHAIRPERSON ENGAGEMENTS

1. In an effort to create awareness about online harassment and measures of safety practices during the lockdown, Chairperson took on a topic, 'Cyber Security & Women' on Twitter Chats on April 7, with Cyber Peace Foundation to empower young girls and women for Cyber Swatchta mission & Digital Shakti movement.
2. Chairperson was invited as Guest Speaker by India CoWin Action Network Facebook Live on April 25, to discuss on 'Relief & Rehabilitation: Why Gender Justice Cannot Be Ignored' during COVID19.

3. Chairperson Smt. Rekha Sharma hosted a session on Facebook Live on April 11, to reach out to families for conversing on mental stress & self-care amid COVID19 lockdown and the need for fostering equal partnership that must begin from home.
4. Chairperson was invited as Guest on Sayfty Twitter Chat week by Sayfty Trust Org on April 27, to share success stories from the ground on 'Community Collaboration During the Pandemic' and best practises during COVID19.

11. NCW IN MEDIA & PRESS

Prior to the launch of NCW WhatsApp Helpline number, NCW initiatives to create awareness among women facing violence on accessing institutional support and available redressal remedy during lockdown was advertised. The women helpline, 181 & 112, NCW complaint portal and social media direct messages were also telecasted on the show for women facing abuse and violence of different forms.



While famous personalities from sports and entertainment industry took on Twitter to encourage the NCW #HappyToHelp Task-Force initiative, several press from the national capital region also wrote on the success stories of the initiative. NCW also received support from actors Madhuri Dixit, Nandita Das and Kirti Shanon in sharing NCW WhatsApp helpline widely.

New helpline to fight domestic violence

People can contact the National Commission for Women over WhatsApp during the lockdown

JAGRITHI CHANDRA
NEW DELHI

The National Commission for Women (NCW) on Friday launched a helpline number - 0721-7725372 - to enable those facing domestic violence to send a WhatsApp message to access help.

"Many women don't know how to send an email, whereas WhatsApp is easy to use. That is why we decided to launch this initiative," NCW Chairperson Rekha Sharma told *The Hindu*. However, she added that the helpline was only a temporary facility being made available for the period of the lockdown.

In the first week after the lockdown, the NCW recorded more than a two-fold increase in complaints of domestic violence and sexual assault as well as a three-fold rise in complaints of police apathy towards crimes against women.

The move comes days after Minister for Women and Child Development, Smriti Irani held a web-conference with more than 1,000 participants from various institutions linked to her Ministry on the issue of women's safety. The Minister sought to convey the message that the government was working for women in need of protection.

Digital governance
She urged her staff to take steps to encourage reporting of violence against women as well as use digital governance effectively to ensure their safety.

Ms. Sharma explained that when a person sends a message on the number seeking help, the NCW's complaints and legal cell will contact her and seek specific details about the intervention she requires. Following this, she will be linked with the local police team or a counsellor from a local NGO or a medical facility or relocated to a One Stop Centre temporarily.

The messaging facility will also help those women who cannot make a call because they may be overheard by the perpetrators of abuse.

The NCW has compiled a State-wise list of One Stop Centres as well as nodal police officers who can be contacted immediately. It is also working on building a network of counsellors and has sought UN Women's help on this.

When asked how the NCW plans to popularise the new helpline, Ms. Sharma said it would use social media, news media, radio and NGOs to spread the word.

On why the NCW did not opt for an easier number to recall as a helpline, Ms. Sharma said, "To set up the facility in a short span, we are merely using a spare personal number we had with us, which will be discontinued after the lockdown. It is also difficult to get a new number because of the restrictions imposed."

During lockdown, as part NCW's special media campaign to create awareness about legal provisions for protection of women and to apprise them on approaching the government through various helplines and support, the Commission carried out an audio-visual media outreach from March 25. Campaign advertisements were released on the themes of 'Domestic Violence against Women' and 'Sexual Harassment at Workplace' and broadcasted on National and private TV channels, AIR & FM radio stations in several Indian languages.

