

# **Covid-19 Pandemic and the Modi Regime: The Invisible Despair of Women**



**AIDWA Publication**



## INTRODUCTION

A shocking incident occurred on June 22, 2020 at the Kadvyachimali village in the Jawhar tehsil of Palghar district in Maharashtra. Mangala Dilip Wagh, a 30 year old poor Adivasi woman, hanged her 3 year old daughter Roshni from a tree with her saree and then committed suicide by hanging herself from the same tree! Her husband Dilip gave this statement to the police on June 24, "My wife was distressed due to our poverty and she took my younger daughter with her and killed herself after killing my daughter. We had no money and the food we had wasn't enough for all of us."

This is one of the most poignant incidents that reveal the effect of the Covid lockdown. There must be many more all over the country. It is only that they have not been reported.

Like Mangala, the Covid-19 pandemic and the thoughtless lockdowns have pushed the people of our country into unprecedented hardships and chaos. Crores of poor, marginalized people and especially women have faced untold and unimaginable suffering during the last three months. The loss of livelihood and employment has led to many of these households, as well as peasant women, women in self-help groups, domestic and home based work becoming more indebted to meet their daily needs.

Women's burden of unpaid domestic duties and family care has increased phenomenally. The exponential increase in the hours of women's labour within the house, providing food, care and services to all family members without respite, 24 X 7, has not been taken into account. With schools being closed, the women also have to put in extra time to pay attention to children's education.

In the rural areas, the collection of dry wood for fuel and fetching of water from wells, bore-wells or rivers is added to the above labour. More fuel and water has to be provided for the entire family.

It is estimated that in India women spend 352 minutes a day, around five and a half hours on such work as compared to 52 minutes by men. This is unpaid work, although it is economic activity that saves household expenses.

On the other hand, the challenge of providing food for the family with reduced or no incomes, welfare measures often remaining out of reach, a targeted and

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exclusionary PDS in operation, their work in the unorganized sector taken away from them with no hope of compensation for losses, forced to take loans or sell whatever assets they have so that their husbands could take a train or bus home instead of trudging back over thousands of miles.....is their exhaustion, suffering and grief on record anywhere? The invisibility of what women are facing is shocking. The patriarchal system has ignored this gender aspect of nearly fifty per cent of the population!

The main reason for the unspeakable suffering borne by countless numbers of the poor in our country, especially women, during the three months of the Covid-19 lockdown rests squarely with the bankrupt and heartless policies of the BJP central government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It has left no stone unturned to hurt the common people in every possible way. It has also left no stone unturned to shower benefits on its crony corporates through its single-minded pursuit of neoliberal policies. Its communal and authoritarian thrust has become even more accentuated in this period.

In stark contrast is the silver lining provided by the CPI(M)-led LDF state government of Kerala led by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan. We are proud that the Health Minister in this government is our own AIDWA leader K K Shailaja. The LDF state government of Kerala, by being the only state government in India to bring the Covid menace under control, has received international appreciation. It has also taken every possible measure to actively help every section of society in and out of Kerala, like its guest workers, to face this crisis.

We are grateful to Brinda Karat, Vibhuti Patel, Sudha Sundarraman, Archana Prasad and Ashwini Deshpande for their valuable inputs. AIDWA units in various parts of the country have also contributed towards strengthening this booklet through their experiences.

We do hope that this booklet will help in raising the gender aspect of the various issues confronted by us during these difficult times.

**Malini Bhattacharya**  
**President**

**Mariam Dhawale**  
**General Secretary**

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## **THE GRIM SITUATION OF WOMEN IN THE COVID LOCKDOWN**

The All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) has been in the forefront all over the country during the Covid lockdown period since March 2020 in all the activities related to relief work. It was in the course of this relief work, that the grim situation of women in this lockdown came to light.

### **TRAUMATISED MIGRANT WORKERS**

The Covid-19 lockdown has revealed the precarious lives of a huge number of people. Overnight lakhs of them became jobless and homeless. According to GOI data, there are 8 crore migrant labour out of which 3 crore are women. Whereas the ILO has estimated that there are 12 crore migrant labour and 30 per cent of them are women. Actual numbers may be much higher as internal and seasonal migrants are not considered in these estimates.

The pathetic condition of migrant labour, including women migrant labourers wanting to return home and the heartless behaviour of the government, administration and police towards them has been shocking and unnerving. So many lost their lives in accidents and due to exhaustion and hunger. Migrants, desperately trying to return home, were the visible face of hunger and despair we saw every day in the media. The anguish of the women migrant labourers, some pregnant, many walking with children, was heart-rending.

Lakhs of migrant workers including women walked for hundreds of kilometres in scorching heat, thirsty and hungry, on roads back to their homes. The Central Government refused to provide any free transport for them. The migrant workers, already in a critical condition, had to shell out thousands of rupees to reach home. Babies were born on roads, in auto-rickshaws and in front of hospital gates. 24 women migrant labour delivered in the Shramik trains. Some reports stated that deaths of new born children and pregnant women have increased threefold. What happened to women who were in different stages of their pregnancies?

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There is no information on the number of miscarriages that may have taken place. And what of the suffering of the women who had delivered just prior to the lockdown and were in crucial need of post-natal care? No one knows their stories!

In earlier days, when migrant workers went home to eager waiting children, they took gifts for the family. This time they took only hunger, thirst, illness, sorrow and despair!

The women who were left behind in the villages, while their menfolk migrated, were equally deprived of food and cash. These women manage their own small farms, cattle and other livestock; they are small peasants or agricultural labourers or small manufacturers doing weaving, garment-making or embroidery; they are domestic servants or provide other services like child care while the men are away. All of them were left without any means of support due to the abrupt lockdown and women's own incomes collapsed. Women who grew vegetables found that they could not take them to the market. The remittances stopped as male migrants grappled with their difficult situations in cities.

So deep has been the trauma and insecurity that it is estimated that only 30 per cent of migrant labour will return to the cities while 30 per cent will search for work near home.

## **UNFULFILLED PROMISE OF MNREGA WORK**

On June 20, Prime Minister Modi announced that Rs 50,000 crore would be spent for giving jobs to returnee migrants by building durable rural infrastructure under the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan (GKRA). This Abhiyaan will last for 125 days and will be implemented in only 116 districts of six states, namely, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Odisha. But the jumla was exposed when it became clear that there was not going to be any additional spending for this Abhiyan. The GKRA is nothing but existing schemes from 12 ministries/departments



with a new name. They include the departments of Rural Development, Panchayati Raj, Road Transport & Highways, Mines, Drinking Water & Sanitation, Environment, Railways, Petroleum & Natural Gas, New & Renewable Energy, Border Roads, Telecom and Agriculture. The scheme leaves inter-district and seasonal migrants completely out of its purview.

The government has decided to conduct a survey of the migrant labourers who have returned to their villages. Just one example will suffice to show their pathetic condition. In Jharkhand, 3.61 lakh migrant labourers were surveyed. Of these 3,35,221 were men and 25,699 were women. 78,500 were not covered under the Ayushman Bharat Yojana. Most of them who were covered, had not benefited from this scheme. 1.89 lakh out of 3.61 lakh had no job cards. One third of these migrant returnees did not have a Jan Dhan bank account!

The minimum wage under MNREGA is Rs 370. But this is only on paper. The actual wage is Rs 230. But women mostly get around Rs 120. There is high demand for work, especially as there is no other work available at present. But the reality is that all are not getting work. Due to scarcity of work, only one person per family, mostly males will be given the work. Women headed households, single women and elderly stand to lose out.

As always, the proclamations of the Modi regime run hollow. Government promises are not fulfilled. The struggle for work for all under MNREGA with proper wages and implementation of the rules to provide women friendly work, drinking water, child care has to be taken up in right earnest.

## **SERIOUS EMPLOYMENT CRISIS**

Women are the worst casualties of the labour market crisis in India. Since they cannot afford to be unemployed, it forces them to take whatever employment is available. The plight of self-employed women is miserable.

According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) (2017-18), the Workforce Participation Rate (WPR) for women was 16.5% at the all India level, which is reported to have increased to 17.6% in 2018-19, as per the recently released PLFS (2018-19). The increase in the overall women's





WPR was largely driven by the increase in rural women's WPR, as that has increased from 17.5% to 19% between 2017-18 and 2018-19. There is a wide divergence in women's WPR across rural and urban areas, and this has always remained low in urban areas. The rise in rural women's WPR can be largely explained by an increase in self-employment for the same period.

Self-employment is the main source of employment for rural women who are largely employed as unpaid family workers who help household members in running their enterprise, but do not receive any regular wage or salary in return. The major contributors to women's own-account manufacturing employment are textile and food processing industries, which are largely dominated by small scale units. Within the textile industry, rural women performed various kinds of activities like *zari*, stitching laces, and other activities related to handloom work. The demand for women workers in the exploitative capitalist system has continuously increased over time since they provide cheap and flexible labour which is also easily available. There has hardly been any increase in the absolute numbers of urban women's employment in regular, salaried jobs.

The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) has estimated that nearly 15 crore people have lost their jobs during the lockdown. The daily wage labourers, workers in the informal sector and small traders account for most of these losses. Women are a large part of the workers in the informal sector. 94 per cent women work in the unorganized sectors. In many places in the unorganized sector work, women have to work in pairs with the men thereby causing undervaluation of their labour contribution.

An analysis of the CMIE survey shows that the average employment for women in March 2019-2020 was 43 million. In April 2020 this came down to an average of 26 million women employed. Thus 17 million women lost employment. The ratio of employment in April 2020 compared to March 2019 was 61 per cent for women. For men it was 71 per cent. This means that the fall in employment was greater for women relative to their pre lockdown level.



Rural women's employment suffered the biggest fall as it stood at average 57 per cent of the pre lockdown level. For rural men it was average 73 per cent of the pre lockdown level.

For urban women, it was average 69 per cent of the pre lockdown level. For urban men it was average 67 per cent of those employed before lockdown.

A survey done by Azim Premji University showed that 71 per cent of women and 59 per cent of men respondents who were rural casual workers had lost their jobs. 89 per cent of women and 77 per cent of men who were self-employed in urban areas have lost their livelihoods. 82 per cent of women and 80 per cent of men casual workers lost work.

Hence the demand for work under MNREGA and immediate passing of the Urban Employment Guarantee Act assumes crucial importance.

## **LABOUR LAWS SUSPENDED TO INCREASE EXPLOITATION**

At such a critical time when the government should reassure the workers, it is resorting to the suspension and revision of labour laws which means that employers are free to fire workers at will and are also exempt from the obligation to raise minimum wages. It also means that the employers are not bound to provide to workers "ventilation, lighting, toilets, sitting facilities, first aid boxes, protective equipment, canteens, crèches and an interval of rest". The revisions would further imply that all other laws about working hours, shifts, wage scales, overtime, benefits of diverse kinds (like a canteen) will no longer be applicable. Also, industrial disputes will be kept in abeyance, enabling employers to hire and fire at will. And, finally, trade union rights, collective bargaining and the right to protest will become non-existent.

The proposed changes in labour laws are not new. The pandemic has been used to accelerate these pro-employer reforms. It is an attempt to consolidate all these laws into four codes. It will lead to irreparable weakening of existing rights as embodied in the Equal Remuneration Act and other laws that benefited women workers. The government had



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professed to increase the entitlement of women under the Maternity Benefit Act, 2017 to six months of paid leave. But it would benefit only women in the organised sector and the entitlements would only be applicable to the 'first live born'. The definition of 'worker' and 'establishment' under the new labour codes does not provide space for the recognition of women in informal labour, who constitute more than 90 percent of the total workforce. In addition the dilution of social security and mechanisms for tripartite negotiations will also reduce the women workers' prospects for achieving their goals of registration for all informal sector workers and their coverage for universal social security. These changes in labour laws are going to be a setback for ongoing campaigns for the recognition of women's work.

Further, the suspension of the contract labour laws will also adversely impact on women workers who will become more vulnerable to trafficking and forced labour since there will be no monitoring of contracts. The suspension of laws regarding paid and weekly leave will negatively impact on women's health and other responsibilities.

Another aspect of the current reforms has been the extension of the working day from 8 to 12 hours in a number of states although some of them had to back out on this following popular protest. This will make women's prospects for getting work more difficult as it will be exhausting for them to work for these long hours with their daily household responsibilities. This means that even if a woman chooses, out of distress, to work during these extended hours, she will have to finish all her other responsibilities in the remaining 11 hours. This implies that her day will start even earlier than it does at present, and her burden of paid and unpaid work will increase substantially, leaving her little time to rest and recoup. This will surely have an adverse impact on her physical and mental health as well as on the children and elderly within the household.

Therefore the AIDWA and its fraternal organisations must start intensifying their ongoing struggles for recognition of the rights of women workers.



## **RURAL DEPRIVATION**

The agricultural sector is also in a crisis with the Modi government turning its back on the farmers. The changes in agricultural laws and in the Essential Commodities Act (ECA) will have serious implications for the food security of our country. This will also destroy whatever little of the public distribution system there exists.

A vast majority of farmers are deprived of the benefit of Minimum Support Prices (MSP) and, in absence of public procurement, are forced to sell their produce at prices much below the MSP in the open market. A study of single women farmers done in Maharashtra revealed that most of them did not get any food grains, 60 per cent did not have job cards, they were forced to make distress sales of their harvests at very low rates profiting private traders and they were not beneficiaries under the PM-Kisan Yojana!

The aggravating crisis in the agrarian sector is adversely affecting both peasant women and women agricultural workers, most of whom are out of work. They also have to cope with the health crisis along with all the adverse impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown.

Tribals account for 8.6 per cent of the population and 11 per cent of the rural population. They are dependent on earnings from the collections of more than 200 types of minor forest produce. With absolutely no infrastructure and help from the government, they are on the verge of starvation. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) remains callously unimplemented in most of the states, although it is now 14 years since it was enacted in 2006.

We should find ways of opposing changes in ECA and agricultural laws and fight for implementation of FRA together with other mass organisations.

## **GROWING HUNGER AND STARVATION**

The Central Government has failed miserably in carrying out its responsibility of providing food and work. On June 1, 2020, the Food

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Corporation of India (FCI) had 10.4 crore tonnes of food grains. Never before has the government hoarded such a large quantity of food grains. This is 8.3 crore tonnes in excess of what the government needs for operational and emergency requirements. The godowns are full, yet people are going hungry. It is criminal that the government is using the excess stock of food grains to produce hand sanitisers! The government has assured that food grains will be given on one ration card anywhere in the country. But what about the families who do not have any ration cards? In spite of repeated demands for distribution of food grains to all poor families, the reality is that very many are still left out.

Many states have reported large numbers of exclusions from the schemes for distribution of free food grains in the absence of ration cards/BPL/Antyodaya cards etc. We have received information of black marketing of food grains in certain places. There is scarcity of essential items and the prices have sky-rocketed. Refilling of cooking gas cylinders is impossible for the poor. Along with free rations, gas cylinders must also be distributed free of cost for six months to tide over the crisis, since Ujjwala Gas beneficiaries do not include all the poor families. This entire situation is leading to increasing hunger and starvation.

There are numerous tales of how women are coping with the lack of food. One woman in Gujarat supports herself and her three small children by working in a weaving shed. Now, there are no orders and she and the children are getting by on one meal a day. Another woman stitches garments for a contractor in Ahmedabad and gets paid on a piece-rate basis. Now, she has no work and her savings are over. She depends on her neighbours for rations. Multiply these painful struggles and deprivation a million times, and we get to see the invisible face of hunger. And that is the face of a woman.

The slums and mohallas of urban India hide equally hungry women and children. The most affected are the women who are the sole earners in their families. These are widows or those whose husbands or fathers

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cannot earn due to illness, or sometimes due to addictions. They work as domestic help, street vendors, construction labour, ragpickers or engage in small manufacturing in their homes and bring in money to support their children and the elderly in the family. They are always on the edge of survival. Now with their work gone, hunger stalks their homes.

That is why the demand for direct cash transfer of Rs 7500 per month to all non-income tax paying families assumes great importance. As per the 2011 NSS data, the number of such families is 23 crore and around Rs. 1, 57,000 lakh is required per month to meet this demand which is around 1% of the GDP. That means around 6% of the GDP is required for the period of six months.

The central government had announced various cash transfers which included Rs 500 into women's Jan Dhan accounts. The insensitive government expected the monthly family expenses to be covered by this magnificent sum of Rs 500! In a study done by Dalberg, a global consulting firm, in mid-April among the 18,000 of the poorest below poverty line families, it was found that 45 per cent had not received free rations. And over 70 per cent had not received cash payments into their Jan Dhan accounts.

During periods of crisis such as at present, existing inequalities get intensified. Intra-family distribution of food in India has been shown to be unequal, in a cultural framework where women are expected to eat last, after feeding everyone else. There is a 50 per cent decline in consumption in rural areas. Women and girl children's malnutrition statistics testify to this cruel reality. The government policies are resulting in mass deprivation, denial, hunger and malnutrition for all sections of the working poor. The criminality lies in the policy of the Modi government which refuses to ensure adequate free distribution of food grain and measures to control prices. Men and women are both affected, but women pay a heavier price. The continuous hikes in petrol and diesel prices are further pushing up prices of all essential commodities. Direct cash transfers, steps to control



price rise and right to food security are important issues for women's mobilisations.

## **PUBLIC HEALTH COMPROMISED, PRIVATISATION ENCOURAGED**

Neoliberal policies over the last few decades have led to the privatisation and commercialisation of public services, particularly in public health care. This has revealed its vicious impact during this pandemic. The lockdown period has not been used to expand health infrastructure either in augmenting hospital space or providing much needed PPEs or adequate testing centres. In almost every state, the testing facilities, hospital beds and ventilators are grossly inadequate. There is tremendous pressure on the ill-equipped primary health centres and rural hospitals. The thrust on privatization has led to an acute shortage of staff. Quarantine facilities are abysmal and women have had to face most horrendous experiences of ill treatment, abuse and sexual violence in these centres.

But there is one category of emergency care that cannot wait for Covid-19, and that is pre-natal and natal services for the pregnant woman about to deliver a child. Sadly, innumerable reports have surfaced about the harrowing experiences undergone by pregnant women. A 25-year-old pregnant woman from Nizamuddin Basti in Delhi was turned away from Safdarjung, then referred to Lok Nayak hospital, which denied her admission because she was not Covid-19 positive. She visited at least six hospitals and maternity clinics in the span of 48 hours before finally giving birth outside AIIMS. A 26 year old pregnant woman died in an auto rickshaw in Mumbra in Thane district in Maharashtra after she was denied admission in 3 hospitals just because she did not have a Covid-19 negative report.

More and more women are reporting refusal of admission by the hospitals that had provided them antenatal care. While some are forced to travel to far-off hospitals, and brave the risk of a coronavirus infection, others have no option but to give birth at home. 22 year old Amreen from Shyamnagar in UP thus delivered a still born child at home, then developed postnatal

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complications and passed away. Such preventable loss of lives is indeed a sad tragedy of this period.

Women's reproductive health has also been affected by the non-availability of contraceptives. The facility for MTP being unavailable, the possibility of unwanted pregnancies is also on the increase. With men spending more time at home, a baby boom is predicted in the near future, adding to the reproductive woes of women. A recent UN report has stressed that the health of women has been adversely impacted through the reallocation of resources and priorities, including sexual and reproductive health services. Women are unable to avail themselves of any health facilities in the present situation. The universal right to health based on strengthening of public health services, not insurance based schemes is very relevant for women.

## **ADMIRABLE WORK BY FRONTLINE HEALTH WORKERS**

The role played by the medical personnel - doctors, nurses, ANMs, *Ashas*, etc. in identifying and treating Covid-19 patients has been a remarkable one. There are 9 lakh public health workers in the country. 90 per cent of them are in the informal sector. 70 per cent of the frontline health workers are women. Has the nation even noticed how many lakhs of women are involved in health care delivery? Have they been provided with the Personal Protective Equipment that they require? Are the masks good enough? The fact that so many of them are developing symptoms of the disease points to their vulnerability. Unfortunately this seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. Recently, the International Council of Nurses has come out with a statement, based on data that nurses and other health care workers are at greater risk from Covid-19. In the absence of proper screening and protection, they as well as their patients are especially endangered.

The public health system cannot operate efficiently without these women workers, but they have to be taken care of. Nurses are bowed down under extra work loads. They are often forced to stay over, bathe, wash, change





clothes before going home. They need proper facilities where they can clean up safely. Scant regard has been paid to the safety needs of *Asha* workers engaged in locating affected persons in far-off areas. Raincoats can hardly be a substitute for PPEs! In many states the paramedical staff, appointed on a contract basis have not been paid their dues in salary. The insurance on the lives of the health personnel is important, but there has to be a risk allowance for all those serving under such circumstances. The Government must urgently take measures to ensure the safety of health workers, not just at work, but at their place of residence also.

## **SELF HELP GROUPS AT THE RECEIVING END**

Women in the unorganised and informal sectors are dependent on daily earnings. They are not in a position to repay the loans they have taken from banks through SHGs. According to the Nabard report 2018-2019, among the total of one crore self-help groups nationwide, 85.31 lakh groups are exclusively women's groups. However, only 50.77 lakh SHGs of these one crore SHGs are linked to banks. In other words almost half SHGs have still no access to bank loans. Loans given by banks to SHGs in 2018-2019 were Rs 58,318 crore. The average loan to an SHG is just 2.16 lakh rupees.

Nearly 6 crore women are members of SHGs with bank linkages in both urban and rural areas. They are utilizing these loans for income generation activities like selling fruits, vegetables, groceries, dairy products and are doing agricultural work and also for their children's education, health and other family expenses. Banks are applying compound interest rates on the loans taken by women in SHGs. Sometimes interest rates are as high as 18 to 24%. Moratorium should be extended to instalments on loans taken by SHGs and the interest amount should be written off too. The Rs 20 lakh loan, as announced in the Government package, along with being collateral free should also be interest free.

Self Help Groups who have taken loans from Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs) are facing severe hardships. Without work and earnings, they are



not in a position to sell their products and repay the loans immediately. In spite of government proclamations regarding moratorium on loan instalments, MFIs who have lured poor women into taking easy loans with high interest rates are pressuring debtors for payment of instalments. They are frequently sending their loan recovery agents to the homes of these women and pressurizing, threatening and harassing them for payments of instalments or interest. There are reports of the loan recovery agents demanding sexual favours to defer the payment of instalments.

AIDWA has demanded immediate steps to stop recovery of loans/instalments/interest till the pandemic and economic situation becomes normal. The loans taken by SHGs must be waived. Action must be taken against harassment and threats for loan recovery. Interest and collateral free loans must be made available to all women of the SHGs.

## **NO SHELTER FROM DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

In India, during the lockdown, there is not much statistical evidence as there is in many countries in Europe, of the increase in cases of domestic violence. The NCW helplines registered double the number of complaints of domestic violence in April than they had the month before. But in any case, registration of cases is just the tip of the iceberg. The NFHS-4 had shown that almost one third (31 per cent) of ever-married women had suffered physical, sexual or emotional violence at the hands of their spouse, with physical abuse being the most common. The lack of any alternative infrastructures available to women in such situations leaves them with no alternative but to compromise with their abusers. The experience of the pandemic highlights the need for many more short-stop and shelter homes for women in situations of domestic violence.

The “boyzroom” episode in Delhi during the lockdown when students of an elite school were found to be involved in the worst kind of sexist and sexually abusive online behavior, including rape threats against girls in their own school and others, highlighted the aspect of cyber crimes against

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women which has increased during this period. The easy availability of pornographic material online certainly shapes male behaviour towards women. Reports of an increase in child marriages and trafficking are also a major concern.

So while we have the Manuvadi proponents glorifying women's subservient role as the natural order of things, we also have the aggressive sexualisation of women's bodies leading to highly objectionable actions and behaviour. This has also got accentuated during the lockdown, with no recognition by either the central or most state governments of this growing crime. Women and students organisations need to work together on campaigns to fight against this growing menace of cyber crimes against women and particularly young women and girls.

## **COMMUNAL PROPAGANDA AND PROMOTION OF OBSCURANTISM**

The BJP Central government is using the national lockdown to further its Hindutva agenda and push its agenda of revenge and victimization, coupled with an aggressive pursuit of authoritarianism and neo-liberal economic policies.

It is communalising the pandemic through the demonisation of the Muslim community, continuing long after the Tablighi Jamaat effect is over. Through the most vile and hate filled messages on social media and backed with physical attacks in many places on minorities, the BJP and RSS are working overtime to divide people in the name of religion.

The RSS-BJP is sharpening communal polarization by targeting the Muslim minority. Activists who organised protests against the CAA-NRC-NPR are being arrested under draconian provisions. Voices of dissent, activists championing democratic rights, civil liberties, the rights of the minorities and the marginalized sections are being booked under laws like the Sedition Act, UAPA, NSA, and are being arrested and jailed. The naked attacks on the right to dissent and the arrests of leading human rights activists include many women is a predominant feature of the lockdown in

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India. Some of the detenus are in frail health but are denied bail using the draconian UAPA.

The cases of Sudha Bharadwaj, Shoma Sen, Safoora Zargar, Natasha Narwal, Devangana Kalita, Dr Anand Teltumbde, Gautam Navalakha and many others prove this beyond doubt. On the other hand, BJP leaders like Anurag Thakur, Parvesh Verma and Kapil Mishra, who instigated the Delhi communal riots in February, are left scotfree.

Media persons who express dissent against the government and its policies continue to be harassed and victimized. This is the real agenda of vendetta that this BJP government is pursuing instead of paying attention to containing this pandemic, saving human lives and alleviating people's misery compounded by the lockdown.

An issue having a serious impact on women is the promotion of obscurantist ideas on the Covid epidemic by the outfits affiliated to Sangh Parivar ideologies. The virus is described by them as an evil female deity which has to be placated, the "Corona Mai". This strengthens the cultural and Manuvadi stereotypes of the "wicked woman". They are mobilising women to perform rituals collectively so as to banish the Corona Mai. Thus, a Hindu religious identity gets strengthened on the one hand and on the other, attention is diverted from the utter failure of the government to deal with the pandemic. The promotion of unscientific theories by those in power has a specific impact on women who are the targets of superstitious rituals and practices. We remember how women are targeted, humiliated and killed after being condemned as "witches" or "bad omens", responsible for illnesses or other tragedies in the village! Joint campaigns should be organised with the People's Science Movement to resist these obscurantist ideas.

## **UNITY IN STRUGGLES**

None of Prime Minister Modi's speeches have expressed the serious concerns of women. His addresses to the nation have been a series of *jumlas* and his so-called packages have been false and illusory.

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Three months of untold hardships and suffering, total dislocation of life and livelihoods, hunger and starvation staring in the face and absolutely no money in hand, being forced to reside with the abuser with no means of escape – all this and more, has caused devastation in the lives of women. AIDWA along with other like-minded women's organisations will have to strongly raise the issues elucidated in this booklet, bring the gender aspect to the fore and hold the government accountable.

There is an urgent need for joint, more direct and visible movements at all levels, especially at the grass root level on burning issues of women, which must be stepped up all over the country along with united struggles against the anti-people, anti-farmer, anti-worker neoliberal policy regime and the communal drive. AIDWA units have to actively raise these issues along with taking up the local problems.

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## DEMANDS

- Immediately implement direct cash transfer of Rs 7500 per month for at least six months since the lockdown began to all accounts of non-income tax paying families.
- Provide 10 kg per head free food grains to all needy persons for the next 6 months.
- Supply all essential items free through the PDS and also free gas cylinders.
- Provide MNREGA work for 200 days to all those who ask for it.
- Implement rules of women friendly work, drinking water and child care in MNREGA.
- Implement MNREGA in town panchayat areas too.
- Start the Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme to provide work in urban areas.
- Withdraw the anti-worker, anti-women changes in labour and agricultural laws.
- Provide all farmer benefit schemes to women farmers, especially single women farmers.
- Ensure treatment for regular patients too at hospitals.
- Provide free contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancies.
- Ensure reproductive health services.
- Stop indiscriminate arrests on false charges of anti CAA-NRC-NPR activists; Release the activists jailed on false charges immediately.
- Ensure security for all victims of violence, especially women.
- Stop communal propaganda and obscurantism.

**LONG LIVE AIDWA!**

**WE SHALL FIGHT!**

**WE SHALL WIN!**



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