

Research Article

Stigma and Marginalisation Meet Disaster: Women's Stories of Distress and Agency

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ABSTRACT

This article captures the gendered experiences of disaster, with specific reference to the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws from a rapid assessment survey carried out by Prayas, a field action project of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, working on the legal rights and rehabilitation of criminal justice affected populations. The survey was carried out in May 2020 through telephonic interviews with respondents who included released women prisoners, trafficked survivors of commercial sexual exploitation and women released from shelter homes. The article brings out the impact of the pandemic on their lives, resulting in loss of livelihoods, shelter, limited access to State and non-State support, fears relating to contracting the virus, and loneliness; further compromising their agency in family and community structures. As women negotiated with their social contexts to meet their survival needs, their experiences of the pandemic were intricately linked with earlier exclusionary societal processes on account of their social position and deviation from normative gender roles. The article also discusses how some women coped with the disaster by showing remarkable strength during the trying situation.

Keywords: Commercial sexual exploitation, Disaster, Exclusion, Offender, Pandemic, Social distancing, Women

INTRODUCTION

While endorsing social inequalities and marginality, the neo-liberal social order is paternalistic with those at the bottom who face narrowing scope of social rights and unemployment, making them more exposed to surveillance and punishment, in what is described as ‘penalisation of poverty’ (Wacquant, 2003, cited in Leskosek, 2009, p. 127). Juxtaposed with people’s engagement in certain occupations and behaviours rendered troublesome to family, community and state; such penalisation takes the form of social control by the reformist or protective mechanisms of the state. A case in point is the criminal justice machinery across several nation states. Peculiar to the criminal justice system (CJS) is the stigmatising impact it has on many that interact with it – persons accused of crime, those convicted for it, victims of crime, and families of all these persons. Women in contact with the CJS carry additional impact – regardless of their legal status as accused or victim, particularly women crossing the threshold of home, family, community, and normative cultural roles. In this context, Franklin (2008, cited in Menezes, 2019) observed the CJS’ preoccupation with morality and sexuality of women and girls as crime offenders and as crime victims. The ‘reform’ and rehabilitation objective stretches across to women victims of crime who are viewed to have some doing in their victimisation. Highlighting the voices of women rescued from commercial sexual exploitation and being processed under the protective mechanisms of the judiciary and state institutions, Menezes (2019) pointed to women’s lack of participation and voice in the delivery of justice.

While criminal and procedural justice is the mandate of the CJS, the essence of punishment and control permeates into social interactions and relationships; to construct what Leskosek (2009) terms as the ‘deviant foreigner’ (p. 132), to ferment fear of the foreign. Meanwhile, the neo-liberal ideology derives its power from the weakening of the economic and social State and the strengthening of the penal State (cited *ibid.*), thereby completing the circle of social, economic and cultural exclusion of criminal justice affected populations from State and community resources. A lesser heard narrative emerges from empirical evidence and field observations that have reiterated trajectories of disadvantage that characterise the lives of women interacting with the CJS for protection – as in the case of women encountering destitution, commercial sexual exploitation, or other forms of violence; or for alleged commission of crime. Tong (2017) examined murders by women that escalated from conflict, and found that perception of injustice could cause a party to become susceptible to the perpetration of serious violence or victimization. Histories of the women indicated that culture and consequently legitimized violence like verbal abuse and humiliation, harassment that was sexual or otherwise, and domestic violence that

were precursors of homicidal violence; were considered private and acceptable within institutions of marriage and family, and expected or tolerable within the cultural context. These precursors earlier did not meet the criteria for a formal response. Batchelor (2005, cited in Wood, 2008) studied victimisation and agency in the lives of young women who committed violent offenses, and found that a number of women shared common histories of disruptive family backgrounds, histories of physical and sexual abuse, childhood experiences of institutional care, substance abuse, self-harm and socio-economic disadvantage.

Social stigma, as defined by Goffman (1963), comprises 'attributes that are deeply discrediting' to an individual. He speaks of three types of stigma: abominations of the body (physical deformities), blemishes of individual character (societal labeling through records of unemployment, imprisonment, mental illness, homosexuality, etc. and as being weak-willed, treacherous, dishonest, etc.) and tribal stigma of race, nation and religion (contamination of all members of the particular family through lineages). Through a process of interaction between the individual and the social audience, a person is first stigmatized and then becomes what the stigma implies. Once the stigma is acquired, it is very difficult to overcome it (Moyer 2001, pp. 180–1).

Stigmatisation involves the process of 'othering' of a certain section of people, by those holding authority over social, cultural and political processes. Transacted through language and culture, and norms governing institutional and community access; it does not translate into a homogenous experience for those stigmatised. The experience of stigma may be specific to certain contexts, even when touching persons across race, caste, gender, religion and other cultural and political realities. It becomes all-pervasive and debilitating when people's personal and social identities and (as Leskosek, 2009, puts it) their destinies are informed by dominant beliefs that shape everyday practices of various institutions.

The trajectories of victims of crime are not so different from those of alleged offenders. Menezes (2016) found that even before they were exploited for commercial sex women viewed themselves as outsiders, unwanted, source of stigma for marrying outside caste community, a means to an income, a burden on family for leaving husband and returning to maternal home, one who brought shame for working/leaving family home, and one having weak character. Later, their exploitation for commercial sex – while sometimes benefitting their families – was accompanied with physical and sexual violence, stigma, and social exclusion (Prayas, 2020). Stigma extends to families of women, especially their children. For instance, children of women prisoners encountered financial challenges, adult roles, emotional trauma and social stigma during and after their mothers' arrest (Prayas, n.d). Crisis and aggravated

distress are a frequent and all-pervasive reality in the lives of women and their children, before they reach processes of crime and/or victimisation; and extend across their lifespans.

We have been associated with Prayas, a field action project of the Centre for Criminology and Justice, School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, that engages with persons interacting with the penal and protective wings of the CJS. Governed by the philosophy and principles of social work over the last thirty years, Prayas attempts to address varying levels of discrimination, disadvantage and violence through the provision of socio-legal services. It has developed a range of community-based social supports to scaffold persons attempting to reconstruct their lives out of crime, deviance, victimisation, exploitation and destitution. It also works towards bringing change in CJS policy and procedure with respect to the rights and rehabilitation of marginalised groups through research, training and advocacy. Prayas's attempt has been to facilitate persons move away from the margins, and find safe, enabling and healthy spaces in their communities. This process may stretch to a couple of years, and sometimes across generations, given the chronic deprivation and disadvantage faced by affected persons. A hidden population, voices of these affected persons seldom feature in dominant public discourse on marginalisation and vulnerability. The interest of this article is to uncover how processes of stigma and marginalisation exhibit in the contexts of disaster – with special reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, and converge into women's experiences of distress and their agency therein. The article is based on the interim findings of a rapid assessment survey of persons with former and current contact with the CJS - as accused persons or victims, and families of these persons. The authors' experiences during their own field work also feed into the discussion. The article uncovers a set of processes that unfold in the lives of these women – not specific to the COVID-19 pandemic, but perhaps aggravated by it and set on a continuum of those that existed before the pandemic and which would impact their future trajectories. These experiences engendered different meanings of social distancing, health and safety. This article is organised in four parts. This introduction is followed with a discussion on the research methodology and the context of the respondents. The third part presents the findings of the study. The article then makes its concluding statements.

Disasters are social phenomena and social processes become more visible in times of crises. Disasters are not gender neutral (Ahmad, 2018). There are processes that suppress, exclude and isolate certain populations on account of their caste, gender or religious identities; and social norms and cultures marginalise those with lesser power over resources. The experiences of disaster and crisis, like stigma, are not homogenous.

They qualitatively vary in accordance with people's social positions and processes that govern those positions. Further, they are varied in different contexts of people's lives. For instance, in the context of women's experiences of earthquakes in Iran, Nakhaei *et al.* (2015, cited *ibid.*) suggested that women experience disasters as individuals; as members of the family and as part of the community. Discourse on gender and disasters predominantly focus on dual themes of women as vulnerable or resilient in relation to the environment (Arora-Jonsson, 2011, cited in Moreno and Shaw, 2018). While gender-based violence increases before and after disasters (Alston, 2013, UNDP, 2010, cited *ibid.*), vulnerabilities relate to pre-existing social inequalities (Horton, 2012, cited *ibid.*). Extreme natural events get actualized as disaster phenomena only in the presence of specific social and structural phenomena (Banerjee and Bhattacharya, 2019). The onset of the pandemic made several people vulnerable, especially those who were poor and without family support, thereby pushing them further into the margins. However, for women with trajectories of violence, discrimination and stigma, their experiences in the disaster situation qualitatively varied. The distress, like much of the other aspects of their lives was hidden. A nuanced analysis of these variations leads us to voice the context of the women Prayas has engaged with during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic and the government's decision on a lockdown, directing people to stay at home and maintain social distances, invited further marginalisation of women and families who were already stigmatised on account of their association with the CJS. A significant percentage of these women were those whose relationships with the family and the community were disturbed and/or beyond repair. Staying at home, in the COVID-19 context held different meanings for these women, bringing to the fore two key processes – women's relationships with their families, community and the State; and their level of vulnerability within each of these spaces. Social distancing effectively meant physical distancing. For the women we refer to in our article, its meaning was literal right from the pre-pandemic phase. Women reaching penal and protective institutions are those who are isolated from the family and the community. Their experience of 'othering' involves two simultaneous processes. Firstly, they distanced themselves from structures that stigmatise. Secondly, these structures excluded them from specific or all of its territories. Corrigan (2004, cited in Grittner and Walsh, 2020) suggested two forms of stigma: public stigma and self-stigma. Public stigma blocks stigmatised individuals from social opportunities, both directly through discrimination and through self-censorship, such as when stigmatised individuals stop pursuing opportunities or seeking services, due to prior negative experiences. Self-stigma involves the internal process within an individual who internalises negative social perceptions, creating shame and negative impact on self-

esteem and self-worth. Consequences of stigma among various marginalized populations include social isolation, lower income and employment, and poor physical and mental health (Benoit *et al.*, 2018; Green *et al.*, 2005; Link and Phelan, 2001, all cited *ibid.*). Experiences of stigma, largely located in the public realm, emerge significantly from institutional structures – both penal and protective systems. While trying to ‘correct’ and ‘empower’, these systems may (as Fook, 2012, describes it), create labels and categories that are potentially dehumanising and discriminating.

METHODOLOGY

Soon after the lockdown was announced due to the COVID-19 crisis, Prayas started receiving distress phone calls from its clients - the people it engaged with, asking for assistance especially in terms of immediate financial assistance or food rations. While there was a significant amount of focus (and rightly so) by public authorities and civil society organisations on migrant labour and homeless populations struggling for survival due to the lockdown situation, custodial populations and their families remained largely invisible. The Supreme Court *Suo Moto Writ Petition (Civil) no 1 of 2020* titled *Covid Contagion and Prisoners and Juvenile Homes* brought some attention towards this group on account of which large number of under trial prisoners have been released on bail and convicted prisoners on parole (albeit temporarily) across the country. According to a report by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA),¹ dated May 15, 2020, more than 60000 prisoners have been released on bail or parole. While direct intervention by Prayas continued in the form of distribution of food rations, cash transfers, medical assistance, house rent and arranging shelter,² we decided to carry out a rapid assessment survey with the objective of uncovering the socio-economic conditions of criminal justice affected persons and their families due to the pandemic and subsequent lockdown. The study was intended to inform us about people’s needs for immediate support, their access to institutional support, and their pathways during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also intended to direct our intervention programmes during and after the pandemic. The respondents included persons who were affected by crime, victimisation or destitution and/or their families. The interim findings of the study reflected in this article, lend insight into the circumstances and experiences of the women.

A structured interview schedule was developed based on the objectives of the study. Data for the study was collected through telephonic interviews. A total of 503 respondents were interviewed, out of which 261 respondents were women. The

¹https://www.livelaw.in/pdf_upload/pdf_upload-374881.pdf accessed on August 9, 2020

²As of August 9, 2020, more than 1600 families have been provided with food rations and more than 800 families have been provided with cash transfers by Prayas.

voices of these women are highlighted in this article. Out of them, 111 were released prisoners, 90 were family members of prisoners, and the rest were those referred by the police, women rescued from commercial sexual exploitation, families of children in conflict with law, women earlier housed in shelter homes, and women facing domestic violence.

Informed consent was taken orally prior to each interview. The researchers, who were social workers and legal fellows of Prayas, were introduced to the objectives, methodology and precautions to be taken given the fact that people were in situations of distress. Researchers were sensitised to be alert to continuing the interviews only as long as respondents were comfortable with answering questions. If they got any cues which suggested that respondents were fatigued or distressed by the seemingly elaborate questions, the interview was terminated. Meanwhile, funds were set aside for immediate support to be provided if it emerged during the course of the interview that the respondent or family was in a situation of extreme distress. Care was taken to ensure that respondents did not see the support given to them as a *quid pro quo* for responding to the questions. It must be borne in mind that most respondents were not new to Prayas. They or their family members had an earlier relationship of trust with Prayas and had received some form of socio-legal help from the project in the past. Therefore, they were told that they were completely free to not participate in the research and could stop answering questions at any point during the interview process, and their willingness to participate or not had no relation with receiving services from Prayas. Majority of the respondents were provided financial support through bank transfers, for emergency situations like purchase of food rations, payment of house rent or medical bills, and mobile recharge. The study was undertaken in Mumbai, Thane, Raigad and Latur districts in Maharashtra, and Bharuch district in Gujarat. The article is based on the interim findings of the rapid assessment, and hence trends and patterns rather than quantitative data is presented.

FINDINGS

The Context Before the Pandemic

Women respondents in the study were between fifteen to seventy-five years of age, although a majority were between twenty-five years to forty-five years. A large percentage of the women were responsible for their economic survival, because they had separated from marital and maternal homes. Around seventy per cent of the women interviewed had undergone formal schooling; mostly between Class Two and Class Ten. Around thirty per cent of the women reported having undergone some form of basic skills training in fields such as patient care, crèche work, beauty care,

tailoring, embroidery and other handwork, nursing, para-professional counselling, para-professional social work, office reception, gardening, and computers.

Around seventy per cent of the women were earning prior to the lockdown, mostly in the unorganised sector, for example, in domestic work, construction work, home-based care, factory work, sweeping, rag picking, housekeeping, agricultural labour, vending, etc. A few women engaged in small business enterprises like selling vegetables, fruits, flowers, cooked meals clothes, etc. While forty one per cent earned a monthly wage, seventeen per cent earned a daily wage. The other women earned occasionally or were paid on a weekly basis. Most women who earned on a daily, weekly and monthly basis earned between INR 3000 to INR 15000 per month. Around thirty five per cent of the women supported their minor children, and twenty seven per cent supported adult children. Forty eight per cent of women reported having an earning member who was either the adult child, spouse or sibling. However, these earning members also earned from the unorganised sector, and most had low levels of education. Only 4.6 per cent of the earning members had undergone skills training. As is evident, many of these skills align with caring and nurturing roles which fit the gender division of labour in society. Given the fact that most of the women are from very poor educational backgrounds, they are stuck with low-end jobs.

Most of the women were single. They were separated from their marital or maternal families, or their husbands were in prison. Family support was mostly absent due to social stigma on account of their identity as former prisoners, having prisoner-husbands, having past engagements in commercial sex, or their non-normative decision to leave home. Over seventy per cent of the women were responsible for supporting their children, and in some cases, dependent elders. Children's needs had to be met, house rent or shelter had to be taken care of, water and electricity charges were to be paid, and costs towards basic survival needs were to be arranged; with minimal education and formal skills at their disposal. Some of them after learning a skill were working with NGOs, and hoped that this led to their entry into employment in the formal sector.

Apart from dealing with these struggles, women having husbands, siblings or parents in prison had to carve out a life for themselves and for their children, while also extending support to their prisoner-family member. They visited prisons for meetings and arranged for their family members' toiletries, dry snacks and cash. A good deal of their physical, psychological and financial energy was spent over these day to day struggles. The pandemic struck when they were struggling to cope with these and other challenges on account of their association with the CJS.

Sixty three per cent of the women hailed from Maharashtra and Gujarat. This could be because the respondents happened to be clients or former clients of Prayas which is based in five districts in these two states. The rest of the women hailed from Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Delhi, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Women across these states hailed from vulnerable districts known for economic disadvantage. Out of the women who hailed from states outside Maharashtra and Gujarat, all except seven did not wish to return to their home state during the pandemic.

Essential Supplies During the Lockdown

Only five per cent of the women who earlier earned continued to receive an income during the lockdown. Like other citizens in poverty, women were suddenly confronted with the challenge of meeting survival needs. There were four processes that additionally impacted them. First, their social supports were weak, leaving them with limited options for seeking help. Second, lack of citizenship documents meant that they had rare access to relief measures, for example, free rations or cash transfers introduced by the government during lockdown. Third, in their attempts to stay invisible to counter the social structures that 'otherise' them, they could not voice their grievances to the community or civil society organisations. Fourth, being viewed as 'troublesome' or 'unadjusting' created barriers in accessing help. In these circumstances, arranging food and essentials on a daily basis was most challenging.

Most women reported they had no rations to cook food. Many women told the researchers they were hoping to get pending salaries. Without the salaries, and not much savings, they had no means to pay rent or to buy essentials and food even after the lockdown was lifted. Most women had used up all their little savings. Many of them ended up mortgaging small amounts of jewellery at high rates of interest. A few of them did mention about relief measures reaching their locations. However, not all received such relief. For instance, one woman reported not knowing when the supplies came, as the neighbours did not inform her. She was generally left out from receiving relief supplies. She said, *'they don't talk with me much ... don't like their children to play with mine. They know how I earned [in commercial sex] ... some women think I will snatch their husbands away'*. Others borrowed or sought help from relatives, neighbours, local politician, local women's group, landlord or shop keepers. However, most women were dependent on rations provided by Prayas during the pandemic and tried to manage with limited essentials during that period.

Other challenges faced by women included obtaining fuel/cooking gas, cooked food, medicines and medical care. Given the locations where many of the women lived,

there was lack of access to water for drinking, bathing and washing. Even when rations were provided, having no cash at hand meant that women had no way of meeting other expenses towards milk, special foods and other items for children, spices, clothes, sanitary items, sanitisers, and other maintenance costs like purchase of bulbs, repair of fan, etc.

Shelter During ‘Stay at Home’

The call to stay at home during the lockdown led to other troubles. Many of the women living with families and supporting their children felt a sense of loneliness and strain of meeting basic needs of the family. Women who did not have a home generally worked as 24 hour patient caretakers (at the home of the patient), or lived with friends. Seema³ who was employed with a family for patient care decided to continue with the job as it offered shelter, even though she had earlier decided to quit. With movement even more restricted than earlier, living within the confines of the employer’s home and being dependent on the employer for shelter led to a feeling of helplessness. Prayas’s social workers have had to arrange shelter for many women even prior to the pandemic. The lockdown brought additional challenges as earlier support from police and shelters was not forthcoming now. Police were busy with lockdown duties. Shelter homes were not authorised to admit new entrants for fear of the virus spread. As a result, women without shelter had nowhere to go. They had to make do with whatever was available in the given situation. Nasima’s husband physically threw her and the children from the house, after she resisted his attempts to prevent her from supporting her sister who was hospitalised on account of burns from a possible domestic tussle. She took shelter in a neighbour’s home for a couple of hours. While the police were sympathetic, they expressed helplessness in arranging for shelter. Nasima therefore decided that she would stop visiting her sister and agree to what her husband directed till the pandemic was over. She had to think of her children and protect them, and she needed shelter for herself and the children. Rekha who was HIV positive and hospitalised prior to lockdown found no shelter accepting her. Prayas then requested the hospital to extend her stay during lockdown. Rekha stayed in the hospital for five months till she was connected with a residential job.

Another set of women had troubled relationships with neighbours and relatives, making their stay at home a source of constant tension for themselves, family and neighbours. Kirti crossed districts to reach her relatives’ home during the pandemic. While her relatives viewed her as different, Kirti herself acknowledged that she had indeed changed to an extent where living ‘like earlier’ was not feasible. She observed,

³All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

They see I have changed, I cannot do housework like them. I speak differently, I dress differently. They say, "she has lived in Mumbai and has now changed". They make fun of me in front of their children. It hurts, but I laugh. I need them, where to go. I had Rs. 7000 when I came here. Some money is stolen by my relatives, but I cannot say anything. You know me, I am not one to keep quiet. Now I am silent. Everyday, I spend on rations and for the [relatives'] children so that they allow me to stay. Money is over now. I am safe [from the pandemic] here... but the pandemic does not scare me. Living here every moment suffocates me.

Kirti finally left her relative's home late evening one day, and travelled to the city to find shelter. She fought her way into a shelter home, by connecting with district authorities to put pressure on an NGO that earlier refused to extend their services, in keeping with norms of social distancing. Reena lived with her grandmother, sister and her children in a community that resented her stay there. Community members accused her of soliciting for sex, and one woman in particular suspected that Reena had intimate relations with her husband. When the animosity escalated, Reena and her sister were attacked by a mob of around twenty women; and told in no uncertain terms to leave the rental accommodation. The house owner was also threatened with dire consequences if he continued to permit Reena to stay there. Reena finally had to shift to another location, with financial help from Prayas. The children of the family were witness to the dispute and the physical attack.

Constant Worries

Given that a larger number of women were financially supporting themselves and their families; now that there was no income, there was constant worry about the future. This brought associated worries. Several women reported worries over family, loneliness, pending legal cases, and inability to pay lawyers' fees. They were also concerned about their inability to recharge mobile phones and subsequently losing connectivity with family, friends and NGOs that formed their support system. Some of the other worries included inability to visit family members in custody due to the lockdown, not having money for travel to meet them, inability to pay children's school fees and meet other educational expenses, and fear for children's futures in the event of their contracting the virus. They felt pained that they were not able to meet their husbands in prison and not being able to provide them with basic necessities. A common reflection heard was, '*if I die [today], who will take care of my children?*'. A researcher echoed women's thoughts when she recorded that women express that '*though life has not been good for me, it will be for my children ... when they will study and move forward*'. Forty six per cent of responses regarding children called for child support.

While attention of the public and the government was focused on exodus of migrant workers during lockdown, women migrants in our study could not return home because of stigma associated with them or with their family members. Also, many visualised total lack of support being extended to them in the native place. Many had lived in the city since many years and that had become their home. Lack of support from family and/or community laced much of the worry, as it reinforced the experience of being left out from normative relationships and support. Women's worries were thus aggravated in a context where they could not share their worries with their near and dear ones, and the onus of not receiving support seemed to rest on them.

Inability to Access Welfare Scheme in Absence of Citizenship Documents

Most respondents were not aware of government schemes for food security, medical insurance and cash transfers during the pandemic, and had not applied for it. There were others who were aware of schemes but lacked necessary documentation to access such schemes. Many women who had documents could not access schemes because of lack of awareness about procedures or knowledge about where or who to approach. Their rental agreements were mostly informal. They also did not have any formal proof of employment. Hence, in the absence of access to welfare, lack of income and social support, women were pushed to near-starvation during the lockdown. One woman told us that due to the pandemic, they have been pushed to greater difficulties and challenges. The distress faced by these women went unnoticed by civil society organisations and the government alike. This led women to experience a strong sense of injustice over not getting relief only on account of lack of documentation, even after residing in a location for years.

Agency

Amidst the series of crises women faced, they exercised agency in varied ways. Some depended on the informal sector for loans, thereby increasing their debts. Others reconciled with their difficult circumstances and continued to live in locations that offered shelter. A few of them placed immeasurable pressure on Prayas to address their circumstances, leading the project to uncover and explore new pathways. A few women reflected on their futures, and expressed need for skilling, seed money to start business, and guidance on how to benefit from government schemes. Reshma, who was provided with cash for buying rations, used part of the money to purchase eggs and started a business of selling boiled eggs in her area. Though in crisis, women were ready to move further in their lives. They had struggled through their lives, but were ready to learn. At the time of submitting this article, eighty five women had sought help in the form of seed money to start their business initiatives,

forty one women sought help to develop new or advanced skills and over a hundred of them were exploring different options to support their children's education.

CONCLUSION

The article highlights the plight of women processed by the CJS, living on the margins, facing social stigma and isolation, and invisible to public policy measures. The COVID-19 lockdown worsened their situation and brought them to penury, near destitution and starvation. They lost their jobs and their incomes, had to take loans and help from unscrupulous people, and spent time worrying about their incarcerated husbands (in many cases) and the future of their children. The State and civil society organisations were not able to reach out to them as the women live atomised lives and often get left out of outreach measures. Invisible to the public due to historical and contemporary processes of social exclusion and marginalisation, women's experiences during the pandemic cannot be viewed in isolation, but along a continuum of those that existed before the pandemic, and which would impact on their future trajectories.

Life experiences have taught these women to face the challenges that they have to face from time to time. After an initial phase of helplessness and despair, we saw the women picking up the threads and exercising their agency to try and change their situation. This included a range of initiatives – putting pressure on Prayas to help, taking loans from local money lenders and exploitative elements (if there was no other option), starting a small business, finding shelter with the help of a friend or through district officials, etc. It is an evolving situation and it appears as if the women will attempt ways to deal with the crisis, with or without outside help. It may lead to putting themselves at greater risk, but fight they will.

While writing this article, we negotiated with the notions of gender and vulnerability, with specific reference to agency, resilience and victimisation. Ahmad (2018) pointed to how gender studies have challenged women being viewed as passive victims. Arora-Jonsson (cited in Moreno and Shaw, 2018) observed that dual themes of women as vulnerable or resilient predominate gender and disaster literature, with less interaction between the two and women's resilience less documented (cited *ibid.*). Other disaster research scholars called for integration between gender, disaster and development (Pelling, 2003, cited in Ahmad, 2018). A developmental perspective would necessitate institutionalised assistance to offenders and victims to address processes beyond their control that may make them vulnerable to crime and victimisation. As Ahmad (2018) contends, vulnerability is temporal and linked to social justice and development. While we acknowledge and respect the agency of the

women through these trying times and the resilience with which they confront their challenges, we also recognise that such agency is extremely compromised in a context of extreme inequality and neglect. Resilience must be built by state and non-state agencies through developmental programmes that enable women to assert, choose, and participate towards exercising their rights. In the absence of this, we are at risk of glamorising their struggles, without a thought of our own responsibilities towards them.

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