

Locating frontline workers' position up against COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

History of mankind has been brutal and marred by wars, attacks, invasions, occupying others territory and killing other human beings with their animals in the process. But now with arrival of Industrial Revolutions in last century or so, we gradually realized that for having and maintaining economic prosperity; we need others' cooperation and since then full-scale wars almost disappeared. But when we fight now and support others in the process, we realise that brute force is only occasionally used entity and most of the times technological methods are deployed to injure others. It is this rationale which makes way for people of either gender having capability to use highly advanced weaponry to enter the arena to decide fate of their side. Therefore, now war is not exclusively masculine entity and that analogy may not be appropriate in modern era. When we use masculine notion to explain our war against COVID-19, there are many shortcomings.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, essential service providers, frontline workers, health-care professionals, modern warfare

"Inspiring stories of women contributing to #COVID19 crisis, many very young. 70% of the health workforce is made up of women – they are the real heroes of the pandemic!" – Soumya Swaminathan, Chief scientist, World Health Organization, July 26, 2021^[1]

When coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic surged against the humanity about 2½ years ago, we had only limited information about what was there in store for us. Nevertheless, frontline workers, health-care professionals, and essential service providers mounted a challenge, posed a brave front, and cared for the sick as much as possible. Also, while caring for the patients of the highly infectious disease, many were sick by the virus themselves,^[2] sometimes their family members got stuck and paid a price for the uphill task.^[3] Although most of them recovered, few did not.

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And it is for this reason that war analogy is brought to the scenario. When an army fights for a cause, for example, to save a territory at the border, to protect its people, it sometimes takes a hit and the soldiers get the maximum respect for responding to their call of duty. Moreover, those who do not make it to the other side when they sacrifice their life and blood, society owes them a lot and honors their family members to express solidarity. As they take risk for others, they have a special place in our hearts.

It is for this reason that those posing a tough fight against an invisible enemy – the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) – are called soldiers. Nonetheless, what needs to be recalled is that when we review our history of independence, we find several women fighters therein. At several points in time, men and women suffered the same way when resisting foreign invasion. When the British invaded *Rajast of Oudh* (modern day area around state capital Lucknow) and captured its ruler Nawab, Wajid Ali Shah, his wife Begum Hazrat Mahal resisted them and sacrificed her life acting as a rebellion.^[4]

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Sarojini Naidu was the first Governor of my state, Uttar Pradesh, in independent India, which was called United Provinces before independence. The poetess is popularly called Nightingale of India. She was elected as the first woman President of the Indian National Congress in 1925.^[5] The political party was then spearheading our freedom movement against the British Raj. Annie Besant, who popularized Theosophical Society in India, was instrumental in establishing Banaras Hindu University before independence.^[6] Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, the first Health Minister of India, spent 3 years in prison for participating in Quit India Movement before independence. She became the first president of All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) at the age of 67, a position she held from 1957 till her demise in 1964.^[7]

Looking at many women leaders and grass root workers who rose from the ground, it is no wonder that in this war too, women workers are putting resistance against the mutated virus while rubbing their shoulders with their male counterparts. When we pose a challenge together jointly utilizing all the available force, the result is unique. Hence, my notion is that this sort of battle is put up by both the genders, not a masculine one alone, and contribution of both the halves of the workforce should be equally appreciated and provided due respect.

It is a known fact now that warfare in the 21st century around the world is played more with technology rather than conventional brute force. When robotics,^[8,9] drones, gathering surveillance data,^[10] snooping on the enemies, having sophisticated weaponry, gathering real-time intelligence, locating devices/faces/identifiable attributes, and eavesdropping decide the outcome of a modern war; it is not surprising that male dominance is out of question.^[11-13]

Although my disagreement with terminology of war analogy is there, but its reason is not only that we do not do so purely or primarily with raw muscle power nowadays. The war is not a masculine entity if you look through the prism of women contributors, in the past and also in the present.^[14] Conversely, health-care workers require full protection of personal protection equipment (PPE) and should get proper rest, sick leaves, compensation as announced by the government, and the state support to fulfill their genuine demands.

When we solemnly promise to protect the sick from any adversity, we ought to include our workforce too in the ambit, who implement our intentions on the field. While the army is trained to win a war by violence, health-care workers are trained to treat civilians at a health-care facility by empathy, caring for others, cuddling an unknown baby, patiently listening to every mundane grievance, and showering love for the sick. Also, they will be able to do so only when the state cares for them.

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