

Repercussions of Corona virus Pandemic on Women Writers and Publishers

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Abstract

As the world stood still for every human being on earth following COVID-19 pandemic, urban working women found themselves doubly burdened with managing homes and work simultaneously. The mass media was bombarded with images and reports of the stress on women during lockdown of 2019. But how about women writers and women publishers? Was there a gender divide too? With printing stalled, bookstores and publishing houses shut, sales and distribution cancelled, manuscripts and drafts stuck in transit, how did women manage the writing and the publishing. This paper seeks to address that did women publish less during lockdown and fell behind their male peers? If yes, then why? Also, how did the women publisher fare during the pandemic. The paper looks at some case studies of publishing houses run by women with special focus on Zubaan a Delhi based independent feminist publishing house.

Keywords: women writers, women publishers, pandemic, COVID-19, digital.

Our own work as feminist publishers, for example, is deeply political. We tread that fine line between operating like a business and thinking like activists. Our presence in the world of publishing is for the purpose of putting feminist knowledge at the centre-stage, amplifying feminist and women's voices and publishing not for money (although it helps!) but for society.

-Urvashi Butalia

Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic has disproportionately harmed women, exposing and exacerbating existing gender disparities. As the world stood still for every human being on earth following COVID-19 pandemic, urban working women found themselves doubly burdened with managing homes and work simultaneously. Many houses around the world had become a nexus of job, school and home life. The mass media was bombarded with images and reports of the stress on women during lockdown of 2019. From domestic violence, unattended

sanitary needs, vulnerability to physical and mental health disorders, pandemic proved very difficult for women (United Nations 2020). But how about women writers and women publishers? Was there a gender divide too? Publishing work was also impacted as all bookstores and printers had to be closed, and the cross-border supply line between printers and publishers was disrupted (Butalia 2020b). With printing stalled, bookstores and publishing houses shut, sales and distribution cancelled, manuscripts and drafts stuck in transit, how did women manage the writing and the publishing. This paper seeks to address that did women publish less during lockdown and fell behind their male peers? If yes, then why? Also, how did the women publisher fare during the pandemic. The paper looks at the case of *Zubaan* a Delhi based independent feminist publishing house.

Women Writers

According to an article published in the famous journal *Nature*, Giuliana Viglione (2020) surmised that women are publishing less during the pandemic and wanted to probe how female academics were managing to write papers during the COVID-19 pandemic. She cites how Megan Frederickson, an ecologist at the University of Toronto, Canada, wanted to see what the data said about this issue. She checked through preprint servers to see if women were posting fewer research after the lockdowns began. The study — along with several others — reveals that, in the face of the pandemic, women's publishing rates have declined in comparison to men's across fields. The findings are in line with previous research on how men and women divide childcare too. Viglione (2020) concludes:

And women face other barriers to productivity. Female faculty, on average, shoulder more teaching responsibilities, so the sudden shift to online teaching — and the curriculum adjustments that it requires . . . And because many institutions are shut owing to the pandemic, non-research university commitments — such as participation in hiring and curriculum committees — are probably taking up less time. These are often dominated by senior faculty members — more of whom are men. As a result, men could find themselves with more time to write papers while women experience the opposite.

More studies also point to gender inequality in publishing during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ribarovska et al., 2021; Isselbacher 2020; Squazzoni et al. 2021). Parents — particularly females — were thought to be required to spend more time caring for and teaching their children, which contributed to the disparity. And if the disparity continues to widen, it might have long-term ramifications for their careers.

Even before the epidemic, women in academics were burdened with heavier domestic and child-care responsibilities than men. On average, women spend 8.5 hours more per week on childcare and other domestic activities than their male counterparts. Aside from having societal conventions on their side, males have a number of other advantages that could help them shift to remote work during the epidemic (Ettinger 2020). Male academicians, for example, are frequently married, and their wives are not academics, according to studies. So, they aren't as affected. Non-academic spouses may have more time or aptitude to manage household responsibilities. Women in academia, on the other hand, are more likely to work with a partner in the same trade – and thus face similar job constraints that leave little opportunity for other obligations.

Women Publisher

As lockdowns were implemented to stem coronavirus spread there was a virtual standstill on publishing, sales and distribution of books in India. As India's publishing business deals with the fallout from COVID-19, its present appeared unstable, and its future, like that of many other industries, appeared uncertain (Anjum 2020).

According to a 2016 *PrintWeek* survey, India has more than 16,000 publishers, making it the world's seventh largest book publishing country. It is also the world's third largest book market, publishing over 80,000 new titles in 24 different languages. When it comes to English-language publishing, which includes academic and trade publishers, India is the world's third largest (Anjum 2020).

Ritu Menon co-founded Kali for Women, India's first feminist press in 1983. She is also founder-director of Women Unlimited, an associate for Kali for Women. Weeks after the March 2020 lockdown began, Menon started to write a diary. She published it later as *Address Book: A Publishing Memoir in the time of COVID*. "The abiding strain in the memoir is Menon's apprehension about the fate of small presses as the virus lays siege on every industry." (Ghoshal 2021). According to Menon,

For publishers, this has had a cascading effect, as it depends on a chain of services and operations, in which each link is critical. Without typesetters, designers, paper dealers, printBuers, binders, distributors, booksellers, courier and postal services, and transporters, no books can be produced. Many of these service providers hire migrant workers; if their labour has dispersed, it will be difficult for them to get them back (Anjum 2020).

The success of publishers like Zubaan in carving out a position for themselves by creating small presses, translations, feminist tales, and quirky fiction during the last several years has been remarkable. By publishing unique and significant works, they have launched fresh talent, gained awards, and engaged readers. Regrettably, the shutdown has ensured that this is not the case. Commercially publishing a book is a dangerous endeavour due to the nature of the transactions, which are primarily credit-based. Publishers pay a large sum of money up front, send their books to the distributor, hold launch events, then propose bookstores to stock their copies, and get paid back after six months (Arora 2020). Urvashi Butalia is a writer and publisher. She co-founded Kali for Women, India's first feminist publisher, and now heads Zubaan, an imprint of Kali. She has long been involved in the Indian women's movement and has also written on a wide range of topics related to feminism and gender. Her most famous work is the award-winning Indian Division entitled *Beyond Silence: Voice from the Indian Division*. She has won numerous awards, including the Pandora Publishing Award, the Nikkei Asian Culture Award, the Chevalier de Artes et de Lett in France, the Goethe Medal in Germany, Bene Melito in Poland, and Padma Shri in India. In an article published in *Scroll.in* Butalia, highlights the problems and opportunities (2020a). "What happened to the women in the world of Indian publishing?" asks Butalia (2020a). Butalia conducted her own research and interviewed her colleagues. Ishani, Butalia's editorial colleague says,

For independent presses with politics, this is especially fraught. We know how powerful books are – that's why we are in this whole thing – but advertising books when people are walking home with their children and belongings on their backs...feels a little absurd. We continue to work with new authors on their manuscripts despite there being no assurances we can be certain of (Butalia 2020).

Zubaan Books, one of the many small publishing houses, is facing an unprecedented crisis and is forecasting a 'no-revenue year.' Urvashi Butalia, claims that she has not sold a single physical book since March 2020 (Arora 2020).

This makes Butalia question the future of publishers like her. She says,

This may sound lofty, but it is true of most small and independent publishers whose starting point is not profit, but a political commitment. Where will the ongoing crisis lead us?

Once again there isn't an easy answer to this question. So amongst us, there is concern and confusion, but as always, there is also a lurking sense of the possible, a sliver of excitement. Many of us, for example, have turned to the digital space for things we were not able to do: Cross borders (you don't need visas on the Net), bring

in authors and speakers from other countries, source visual material and find ways to showcase it on the Net, hold discussions and workshops (2020c).

She also fears that her publishing house will have to face a big financial crunch. Also, looms in her mind the challenges posed by the e-book industry.

None of this will make us money — for that we have to wait till we're able to print books again. The books won't make us money either, but at least they will find their way into markets. Perhaps they'll give us enough to break even and continue publishing.

Meanwhile, the digital presence, however limited, will allow us to remain in touch with our community, with readers, to help us come up with new ideas for books, to locate new authors, and, maybe, even have discussions about new ways of doing what we set out to do all those years ago: Amplifying the voices of women, particularly those from the margins, in our country and beyond (2020c).

Butalia also says that the limits imposed on public gatherings in book launch events, transportation, and industrial enterprises have a significant impact on the selling of physical books and the value chain. They are hesitant to spend in printing and unsure about taking on new manuscripts because no customers are coming to bookstores and printing presses are inaccessible owing to state border restrictions(Arora 2020).

There is a clear message sent out to publishing houses: Books are inessential commodities. She also opines,

But this crisis is different, for it's not just we who are on tenterhooks, but the ecosystem, community, channels of distribution et al. Printing presses are shut so we can't print books. Distributors' warehouses are closed, so are bookshops — the books can't move. Even if they could, there is no transport. Some bookstores have now opened, but we can't rid ourselves of the question: Should we be talking about books when people are starving? Do people really need books?

There's no easy answer to this question. Food for the body is important, but so is food for the mind. Despite the advances in digital technology, the printed book is still very often the first go-to option for those who want to learn, or be entertained, or be in the presence of great minds and stories (2020c).

For people such as Butalia, whose primary work deals with women as writers and publishers, their work was relegated to the margins, awaiting acceptance and redemption in the digital space only. It also made publishers like her question the relevance of what they do. Butalia

further adds that in many ways, “I believe we all recognize how important it is. While the lockdown has caused some challenges for those of us who belong to privilege and work in a profession dominated by class and caste privilege, they are nothing compared to losing one’s home, job, livelihood, and even one’s dignity”(Butalia 2020).

Conclusion

According to all indications, the publishing industry will take a long time to recover from the effects of the lockdown, as well as the general COVID-19-driven slowdown. And printed books will bear the brunt of it. Publishers across the world have been forced to think of new ways to reach out to and engage readers because of the lockdown, most notably through the digital medium. Because these consequences will worsen as long as lockdowns are in place, institutions and funders should take steps to address gender discrepancies as soon as possible. They indicate to a problem that, if left unchecked, may have serious ramifications for academic diversity (Giuliana 2020). The commencement of the lockdown compelled publishing houses to not only investigate the digital domain as a potential new launch pad for new content, but also to adopt the format. For example, the publishing behemoth HarperCollins India turned “digital overnight” to preserve the publishing ecosystem and adhere to the literary calendar to which it had committed (Arora 2020). The pandemic has exposed several long-standing problems in the publishing system, and the challenges experienced by female authors and publishers appear to be yet another issue that must be addressed.

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