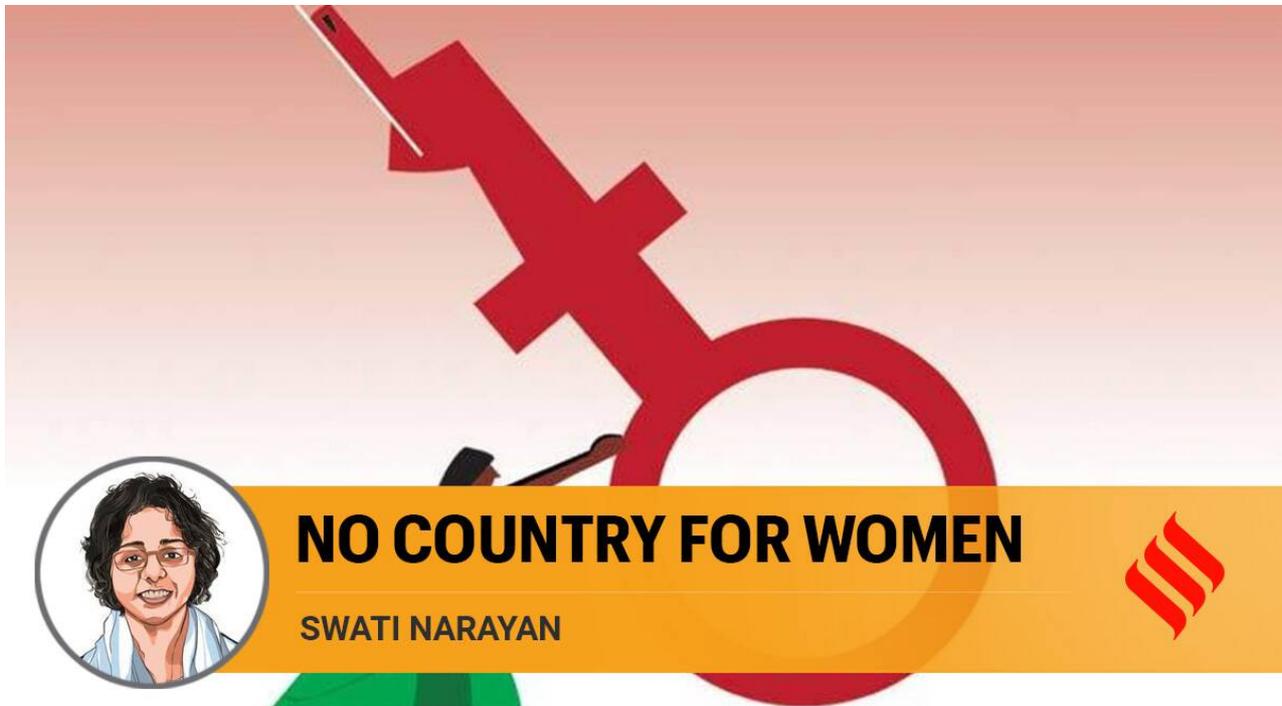


# India is no country for women. Could the pandemic help change that?

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There is little doubt that women are now inadvertently on the frontlines of a pitched battle against the toxic masculinity of muscular nationalism and extractive corporate plunder.

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India is amongst the most unequal countries in the world to be a woman. The latest annual Global Gender Gap Index released by the World Economic Forum places India 17th from the bottom, with Afghanistan being the lowest. But unlike most nations in this dismal league, in India discrimination starts in the embryo. With the misuse of ultrasound technology for sex-selective abortion, each year India euphemistically has, as per UNFPA estimates, more than 46 million “missing women”.

But why has India’s rank slipped 28 places in the last year? Despite a string of state elections, the share of women ministers has declined sharply from 23 to 9 per cent. Further, Indian women’s labour force participation has plummeted in the last decade to a mere 21 per cent. Before the pandemic, Indian boardrooms had only 15 per cent of women, even as the #MeToo movement exposed the iceberg of sexual harassment in the workplace. Now there are fewer Indian women in the workforce than even Saudi Arabia. Workplace crèches, though legally mandatory in all offices with more than 50 employees and MNREGA worksites, are rare. Anganwadis, too, have yet to be expanded into crèches. On the other hand, the East Asian growth “miracle” was associated with large increases in working women.

Patriarchy is largely instilled at home. Indian women's daily work is almost 10 times more than men on unpaid domestic chores as per the 2019 NSSO time-use survey. There is now a wealth of new data from the first phase of the 2019-20 National Family Health Survey. Preliminary population weighted averages from 17 states reveals that even before the pandemic, child marriages have marginally increased since the previous survey in 2015-16. While education is now more inclusive, with three-fourths of women literate, only 37 per cent complete Class 10. Beyond the classroom too, opportunities for women often dry up. Less than a third of Indian women earn an income. Compounded with the lack of economic independence, more than a quarter of married women also report spousal violence. However, four out of every five women now operate their own bank accounts, more than two-thirds of young women use menstrual hygiene products, more than half of married women use modern contraceptives and almost half have a mobile phone, though less than a third have ever been on the internet. The National Crime Records Bureau enumerated nearly 88 rapes daily in 2019, with Dalit women in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh the most vulnerable.

<https://images.indianexpress.com/2020/08/1x1.png>

Within South Asia, however, 83 per cent of post-conflict Nepali women now work outside the home. Women's quotas also flourish from parliament to local governments. Bangladesh has also raced ahead as the only country where women have reigned as heads-of-state for longer than men.

Rwanda is also one of the few developing countries which has surprisingly closed the gender gap, on several fronts. The turning point was the 1994 horrific genocide and mass rapes, which altered the country's demographics. With quotas in the 2003 Constitution, women now dominate two-thirds of parliamentary seats.

In India, on the other hand, as a new generation of dynamic women from Disha Ravi to Nodeep Kaur and Hidme Markam face arrest and sedition charges, there is little doubt that women are now inadvertently on the frontlines of a pitched battle against the toxic masculinity of muscular nationalism and extractive corporate plunder. The women of Shaheen Bagh also embody this new wave of intersectional feminist movements.

Every day, we are reminded in no uncertain terms that India is no country for women — within or outside the home. But could the crisis of the pandemic be an inflection point for Indian gender norms?

***This column first appeared in the print edition on April 28, 2021 under the title 'No country for women'. The writer is a Post-Doctoral Researcher at the National Institute of Advanced Studies.***