

COVID-19 and Women Informal Sector Workers in India

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The precarious nature of employment of women informal workers is examined using data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2018–19). To capture the gendered experiences of informal workers during the lockdown period, data from a series of rapid assessment studies is used. It was found that the unequal gendered division of domestic chores existed even before the onset of the pandemic, but the COVID-19-induced lockdowns have further worsened the situation. In terms of paid employment, women tend to work in risky, hazardous and stigmatised jobs as front-line health workers, waste-pickers, domestic workers, but do not receive the minimum wages as specified by the government.

The sudden decision of the Government of India to impose a nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020, with just a four-hour notice followed by a near complete shutdown of all economic activities imparted a devastating impact on the labour market. As a result, the unemployment rate had increased manifold. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's (CMIE) Consumer Pyramids Household Survey (CPHS), unemployment rates in April and May were over 23% in India, which was three times higher from the value last year (Vyas 2020). The cessation of all economic activities would result in a prolonged dip in informal sector workers.

The International Labour Organization (ILO 2020) report has indicated that as a result of COVID-19, an estimated 400 million informal sector workers are at risk of abject poverty in India. Women are likely to bear the brunt of job losses the most because much of their work is invisible, and they are more likely to work in informal work arrangements.¹ Moreover, the significant and widening gender gaps in workforce participation rates, employment and wages that existed before the lockdown were expected to intensify during the post-lockdown period. Additionally, India has recorded one of the most unequal gender division of household work, and according to the first (and only) national Time Use Survey (TUS) (1998–99), women spend around 4.47 hours per week on direct care work (that is, looking after children, elderly, sick and disabled), while men spent only 0.88 hours per week. Along with the gross imbalances in gender distribution of unpaid care work, the COVID-19 pandemic might worsen the situation by increasing women's burden of domestic chores, unduly cuts and lay-offs in employment.

The existing literature has empirically examined the first effects of the lockdown

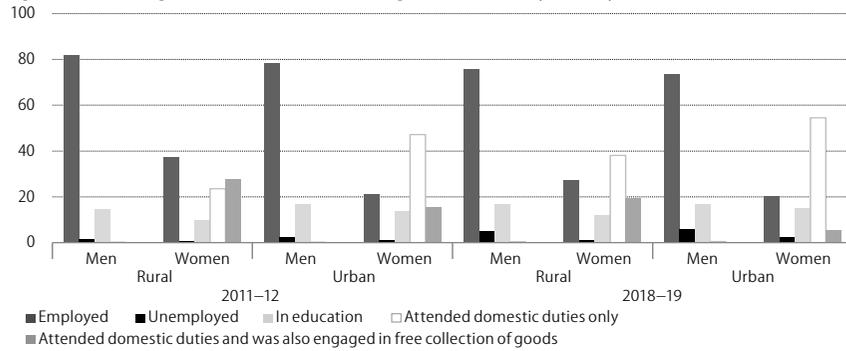
on overall employment in India and not considered gender particularly (APU 2020; NDIC 2020; Kapoor 2020). Only Deshpande (2020) investigates the immediate impact of the COVID-19-induced lockdown on all women workers. This article provides an overview of the employment and conditions of employment of women informal workers under which India imposed the lockdown, using the recently released Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) (2018–19). It also compares it with the last available quinquennial Employment and Unemployment Survey (EUS) of the National Sample Survey (NSS) (68th round) to highlight the overtime change and pattern in women's paid and unpaid work in India. While pre-lockdown employment is the strongest predictor of post-lockdown employment, its effect is different for men and women and for those who are largely involved in informal work and not equipped to cope with this unprecedented shock. To capture the gendered experiences of informal workers during the lockdown period, the study also uses data from a series of rapid assessment studies conducted by the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) on women informal workers in five different sectors (domestic work, street vending, waste picking, home-based work and construction work) in Delhi.²

Trends in Women's Work

India has recorded one of the lowest women workforce participation rates (WFRs) in the world, and the PLFS (2018–19) highlighted a further decline from this low value.³ The existing literature has proposed different hypotheses for the decline in women's WFR up to 2011–12, such as the issue of mismeasurement related to women's work (Ghosh 2016; Hirway 2012), lack of demand for jobs in occupations and industries suitable for women (Chatterjee et al 2015; Kingdon and Unni 2001) and the supply-side effect, which depicts that with an increase in household income, women, especially in poorer families, withdraw from arduous work (Himanshu 2011; Srivastava and Srivastava 2010; Thomas 2012). However, from 2011–12 onwards, there were attempts to explain it in

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Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of Persons (Age 15–59 Years) by Activity Status, 2011–12 to 2018–19



Activity Status UPSS is considered, which includes the principal activity (on which the person spent a relatively long time) and the subsidiary activity (on which the person spent a relatively short time but at least 30 days) during 365 days preceding the date of the survey. Figures will not add to 100, as renters, pensioners, remittance recipients, disabled and others are excluded. Source: Computed from NSS 68th round and PLFS (2018–19) unit-level data on employment and unemployment.

terms of the shift to more women engaging in unpaid household work, which includes household chores, such as cooking, cleaning, washing, shopping, caring for the elderly and children (Chakraborty 2019). Surprisingly, during the same period (2011–12 to 2018–19), women experienced a decline in the domestic and allied activity,⁴ which may be a welcome sign if there is any improvement in infrastructural facilities like increasing access to drinking water and fuel for which they need not spend a long time like before. But, it could be a misclassification by investigators because of the corresponding shift to only domestic chores, or it may be the result of more education, as suggested by the increase in open unemployment of women (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2020).

In India, because of women’s unacknowledged and unpaid contribution towards many economic activities and also due to social reproduction, men have a hidden advantage in the labour market as they do not have to share the burden of domestic chores. Figure 1 clearly shows that the share of women engaged in only domestic activity and domestic and allied activity together was 57.4% and 60% compared to just 0.5% and 0.6% for men in rural and urban areas, respectively, in 2018–19. There is also evidence that women’s WPR is negatively associated with the presence of young children in the household, and that, over time, the burden of child-rearing has increased in India. During 2011–12, only 33% of married women (aged 25–55 years) with young children participated in the job market, while in

2018–19, it reduced to only 24%. With the gross imbalances in the gender distribution of unpaid care work, the COVID-19 outbreak is expected to further increase the demand for childcare needs.

Among the employed, self-employment is the predominant source of employment for women, but almost 31% of them were largely employed as unpaid family helpers in 2018–19 (Table 1). Further, among the self-employed women, many of them worked from within the household premises, without having any fixed workplace and with less than six workers. Among the women regular wage employees, there were several who had no written job contracts, were not eligible for any paid leave and were not entitled to any social security benefits. On the other hand, in 2018–19, 24% women worked as casual wage labourers and received wages according to the job contract. Given this precarity and the ab-

sence of any standard employer–employee relationship, it is not surprising that women suffered the highest decline in employment. Four out of every 10 women who were working during the last year lost their jobs amidst the lockdown, while rural women were hit the hardest of all (Deshpande 2020). According to the APU (2020) survey, the share of women reporting job losses was higher relative to men in India during the lockdown.

The COVID-19 crisis had occurred when there was already high and increasing open unemployment, and a large population of the Indian workforce was employed in the informal sector. In India, 87% of the workforce was in informal employment, and even among the regular wage employees, 62% were employed in informal sector in 2018–19. Women working in the informal sector are known to face different structural constraints. Further, women in poor households are more likely to work in the informal sector and in more vulnerable categories of work, such as paid domestic work or self-employed home-based work (Chen 2016; Raveendran 2017). Table 2 presents women’s employment distribution across industries along with a sectoral break-up. It shows that agriculture remained the largest provider of employment for women in both the periods. Although the ILO has considered it as a low- to medium-risk category, in India, the agricultural sector is mostly informal, and women workers in this industry

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Workers by Employment Status, 2011–12 to 2018–19 (Age 15–59 Years)

Usual Status Approach	2011–12			2018–19		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
Own account workers	34.7	20.6	30.4	38.7	21.5	34.5
Employers	1.6	0.3	1.2	2.6	0.6	2.1
Unpaid family workers	11.2	36.8	19.1	8.1	30.8	13.7
Total self-employed (SE)	47.5	57.7	50.6	49.3	52.9	50.2
SE workers operating from own-dwelling unit	22.63	82.2	40.85	17.0	69.6	27.9
SE workers with less than six workers	90.1	95.9	92.1	89.1	95.9	90.7
Regular wage (RW)/salaried employee	18.9	10.4	16.3	26.1	22.9	25.3
RW workers without any written job contract	65.4	65.1	65.3	70.5	67.0	69.7
RW workers not eligible for paid leave	51.0	48.7	50.5	54.8	50.8	53.9
RW workers not eligible for any social security benefit	55.0	58.7	55.7	51.2	54.8	52.0
Casual public works	0.8	3.2	1.6	0.2	2.3	0.7
Casual other works	32.8	28.6	31.5	24.4	21.9	23.8
Total casual workers	33.6	31.9	33.1	24.6	24.2	24.5
Casual workers receive regular weekly payment	22.1	28.3	23.0	NA	NA	NA
Casual workers receive daily payment	61.5	43.9	58.9	NA	NA	NA

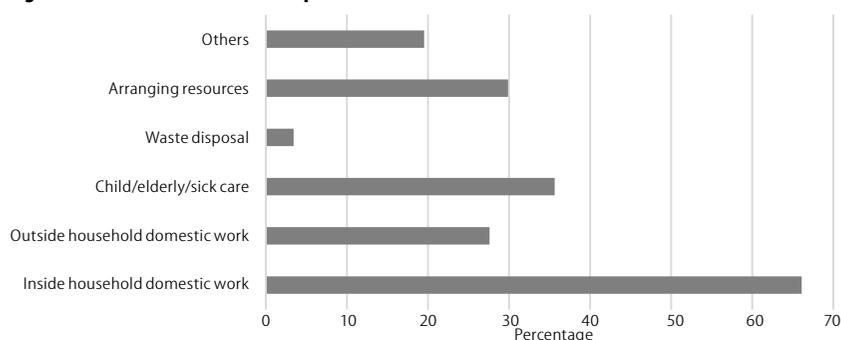
Activity Status UPSS is considered.

Source: Same as Figure 1.

comprise the largest group of landless labourers. About 14% of women were involved in the manufacturing industry in 2018–19 and the sector has been hit hard. The sector is labour-intensive and often employs low-paid, low-skilled women workers. The drop in effective demand, particularly for non-essential goods, makes those employed in the sector susceptible to lay-offs. The trade, hotel and restaurant industry employs 7% of women workers in India in 2018–19, but 95% of women are involved in informal work arrangements. Though the ILO has put the construction sector in the medium-risk category in terms of job loss, in India, almost all women in this sector are informal workers working as daily wage labourers, and they have been affected most as all the construction activities completely ceased during the lockdown period.

In contrast to the above sectors, public administration, health and education industry is at relatively low risk in terms of job loss, but many of these front-line health workers are employed as voluntary workers in public employment, like accredited social health activist (ASHA) and anganwadi workers. They are recruited on a contractual basis and are not even paid wages but only an “honorarium,” significantly lower than the minimum wage. Similarly, there are 10.6 million domestic workers in India, and 82% of them are employed in urban households, with wages lower than the national minimum wage in 2018–19.⁵ But owing to not registering with the unorganised sector social security board, they are not entitled to get any government relief under the same, and so they

Figure 2: Reasons for Increase in Unpaid Burden of Women Informal Workers in Delhi



Total sample size 176, values are based on multiple response.
Source: ISST Survey (2020).

have been the most vulnerable to the first-wave effects. In a nutshell, the gendered impact of COVID-19 is profound, and women are impacted differently because patriarchy and sociocultural norms play a critical role and push women into precarious informal employment with no job security (Sili 2020; UN 2020).

Lockdown and Women Informal Workers

The ISST adopted a mixed methodology and interviewed 176 women informal workers in Delhi between 23 and 30 April 2020 to capture the nature of their employment and daily life challenges amidst the lockdown. Figure 2 shows that of those surveyed, 66% reported an increase in inside-household domestic chores, and 36% stated an increased burden of child and elderly care work during this period. Closure of schools and day-care centres have put additional burden on women, and because of the lockdown, all the household members are staying at home, which led to an increase in their volume of work. But interestingly, around 30% women highlighted the responsibility of arranging

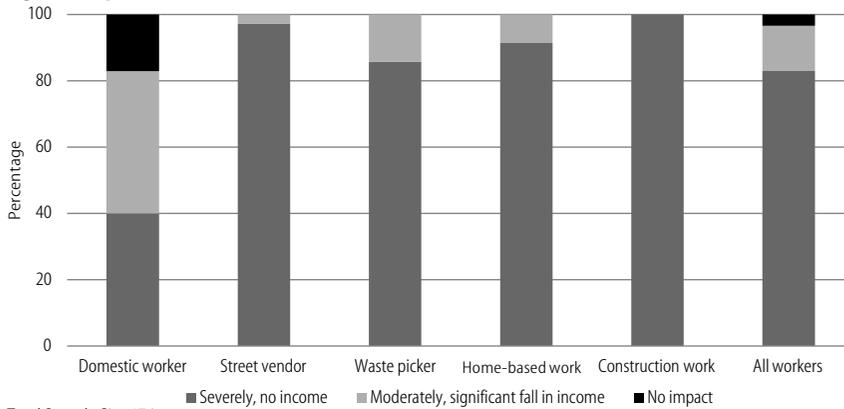
food and other essential items as an added burden during this period because of the stringent implementation of the lockdown and the increased instances of police harassment of men. More than half of the women respondents indicated the problem of unequal division of the domestic responsibilities and stated that no one helped them with household chores. However, surprisingly, 26% received help from their spouses. Deshpande (2020) also found an increase in hours spent on household chores for both men and women, though the increase was higher for women relative to men during lockdown.

The ISST survey also pointed to the major impact of the lockdown on the earnings of women informal workers. Around 83% of women respondents witnessed a severe income drop, while the sector-specific results indicate some interesting patterns (Figure 3). All the construction workers reported a loss of paid work, while 97% of the street vendors opined that they had no source of income during the lockdown. During the personal interviews, women home-based workers mentioned that owing to the closure of factories, interruptions in supply chain, restrictions on transports carrying raw materials and payments withheld by subcontractors/employers even for the work that was already completed, they have not had any income in their household since mid-March. Women waste pickers stated the difficulties not only in collecting waste, owing to restrictions on movement, but also while segregating and selling the same as all shops were closed, and they were forced to sell the waste at significantly reduced prices.

Table 2: Women’s Employment Distribution (in percentage) by Broad Industry Division, 2011–12 to 2018–19

ILO Classification of Current Impact of Crisis on Economic Output	Industry	Share of Employment in Total Employment		2011–12		2018–19	
		2011–12	2018–19	Informal Sector	Formal Sector	Informal Sector	Formal Sector
Low-medium	Agriculture and allied	68.2	59.5	97.4	2.6	99.4	0.6
Medium	Mining and quarrying	0.3	0.2	85.5	14.5	90.9	9.1
High	Manufacturing	14.1	13.8	95.4	4.6	88.4	11.6
Low	Electricity, water, etc	0.2	0.3	57.7	42.3	90.4	9.6
Medium	Construction	6.3	5.9	44.8	55.2	97.6	2.4
High	Trade, hotel and restaurant	4.7	7.2	96.5	3.6	94.5	5.5
Medium-high	Transport, storage, etc	0.5	1.1	36.4	63.6	29.2	70.9
Low	Public administration, health, education	5.7	12.0	35.4	64.6	61.0	39.0
	Total	100	100	94.9	5.1	87.3	12.7

Activity Status UPSS is considered. ILO Report (2020), Table 2: Workers at risk: Sectoral perspective, pp 4–5.
Source: Same as Figure 1.

Figure 3: Impact of Lockdown on Women Informal Workers in Delhi

Total Sample Size 176.

Source: ISST Survey (2020).

The impact of the pandemic-induced lockdown on domestic workers' income or wages appeared less as most of them reported that their employers had paid them salaries for March. However, they anticipated a cut in salaries for April and May if the lockdown continued. During the personal interview, one women domestic worker commented on the informal nature of the employer-employee relationship and shared her grief, which was also resonated by others:

Didi, I have been working in these houses for last 12–15 years, but since the lockdown not a single employer has called me to know about my well-being ... usually they call me beta, but in reality, I am not their beta. (As shared by Anushikha, Chetanalaya, April 2020)

The ISST survey also probed the reasons for their drop in income, and several respondents have opted for more than one reason, and among them, 68% respondents stated the inability to go out due to lockdown and police patrolling, while 55% reported the fear of contracting the disease and the unavailability of protective equipment as the main reasons for their drop in income (Chakraborty 2020).

Conclusions

Before the COVID-19 crisis, India was grappling with a low and declining women's WPR along with a high, precarious informal employment. So, some sort of minimum employment guarantee scheme by the government is likely to help women informal workers as a stop-gap solution in the case of no available work. Some employment guarantee programmes are also required for urban informal poor in the absence of any safety nets. Further, with reservation for women

in such schemes, a considerable percentage of urban women informal workers would be benefited.

Informal sector workers who survive on meagre wages are in desperate need for food, and universalising the public distribution system with a higher quantity of foodgrain allotment for at least the next few months will help them fight hunger and abject poverty. The impact of this pandemic on informal workers' wages/income is already devastating, and there is a dire need to provide some cash transfer to every household to those known to be more vulnerable. Following the recommendations of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS 2006), extending social security to informal workers is the need of the hour. Finally, the increasing reliance of the government on underpaid women workers in implementing major public schemes like health, nutrition and education without even recognising them as workers needs to be rectified.

NOTES

- 1 Globally, informal employment is a greater source of employment for men (63%) than for women (58.1%), but in India, a higher proportion (90%) of women are in informal employment than men (87.7%) in 2012 (ILO 2018).
- 2 <https://www.isstindia.org/publications/>.
- 3 According to the official Employment and Unemployment Survey of National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), WPR for women of the productive age group (15–59 years) was 32% in 2011–12, which declined to 25% in 2018–19.
- 4 Domestic and allied activity includes domestic duties plus extended SNA activities like free collection of goods like vegetables, firewood, cattle feed, etc, water collection, sewing, tailoring, weaving, etc, for household use.
- 5 The Expert Committee fixed the single value of the National Minimum Wage (NMW) for India at ₹375 per day (or ₹9,750 per month) as of July 2018, irrespective of sectors, skills, occupations and rural–urban locations, and introduced an

additional house rent allowance (city compensatory allowance), averaging up to ₹55 per day, that is, ₹1,430 per month for urban workers over and above the NMW (see: https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/Committee_on_Determination_of_Methodology.pdf).

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