



COVID-19 and Women Informal Sector Workers in India

Commentary

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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 (CMIE) Consumer Pyramids Household Survey (CPHS),

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) (199899), 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.



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