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Women Informal Workers: Falling Through the Cracks in the Pandemic

Some necessary steps must be taken by the government like extending provisioning of free ration kits and implementing minimum wage from women informal workers.



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The Cracks In The Pandemic (2017-18), 415 million employed persons, 415 million were in informal employment. Furthermore, informal employment is a greater source of employment for all Indian men in India. Within the informal economy, there are five categories of work that are more vulnerable than others, but essential for the effective functioning of society, and a large proportion of workers are involved in these low paying informal jobs. These are home-based workers, domestic workers, street vendors, waste pickers and construction labourers.

Among these, women are largely concentrated in domestic work and home-based work while in informal construction and waste picking activities, women usually work as support workers. The immediate economic impact of the pandemic induced lockdown is already being felt by these informal workers and women are more likely to bear heavier brunt of job losses mostly because their work remains invisible.

Against this backdrop, in April-May 2020, the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) carried out a series of Rapid Assessment Studies to understand the immediate gendered impact of COVID-19 and the related lockdown on women workers in Delhi engaged in five informal sectors – domestic work, home-based work, construction work, street vending and waste picking. A telephonic survey was conducted with 176 women informal workers and it highlighted that irrespective of the sector the women were employed in, they all faced huge loss of income and paid employment during the lockdown.

Now, that several months have passed since the survey was conducted and the unlock period has crossed a few months, a telephonic survey was conducted with 316 women informal workers working in these five sectors in Delhi during October-November 2020 to understand and assess



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anges in tracks in the pandemic social and
1. In the survey, respondents belonged to
6 to 70 years and most of them were
r, the nature and extent of marginalisation
all women and the concentration of
women from some particular caste or religious groups in
some specific sectors is evident in the study.

Also read: [Increased Care Work, Reduced Wages: Informal Women Workers Are Barely Getting By](#)

Of those surveyed, 64% of the respondents claimed to have lost the means to work, while 18% reported a significant fall in income/earning and only a few could find new employment opportunities even after the post lockdown period. However, the sector-specific results of the impact of the pandemic-induced lockdown indicated some interesting patterns. 83% of these part-time **domestic workers** highlighted a significant decline in the number of households that they could now work in compared to pre-COVID days. Those who were able to get back to work pointed that their employers asked them to follow new norms like washing of hands and feet, changing clothes and wearing masks all the time during work.

Closure of market or vending areas is a major work-related challenge for women **street vendors** and some of them revealed that fear over the spread of COVID-19 has kept many customers away and thereby their income was decimated over the past six months. Further, since physical shopping has a perceived risk and induces fears of being in proximity to others, consumer buying patterns have rapidly shifted to online shopping. The survey showed that 87% of women **construction labourers** have completely lost their work and only a few of them were able to resume their work during the post-lockdown period. But all of them were

The Cracks In The Pandemic

The  said that **home-based workers** who were part of co-operative producer companies received at least some support before and after the lockdown but the individual workers who were not part of any co-operatives could neither get onto online platforms to sell their products nor shift to mask stitching or food supply chains that were in demand. Moreover, these women workers who were not member of any cooperatives were the worst affected as they lost all sources of income as an impact of the lockdown and struggled to find work even after the lockdown was lifted.

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Of those surveyed, 64% of the respondents claimed to have lost the means to work. Photo: PTI

Waste workers suffered many challenges related to their work and in many parts of Delhi, private companies have been given the responsibility of collecting waste. With the entry of the private sector women waste workers were not getting space in Community bins (*dhalaos*) to segregate and with the fear of COVID-19 the nature and conditions of work has changed for these waste workers. One-third of them also found difficulty in collecting waste and amongst those who were able to collect, some had to discard the waste and others were forced to sell it at lower prices.



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indicated in the survey, 59%
se in inside household domestic work like
while, 9% of women informed about the
household domestic work like fetching
firewood, fuel over the last six months.

66% of women respondents mentioned that since the schools and anganwadi centres are still closed, they have to spend more time with children. But in terms of getting help from other household members in performing domestic chores, every 4 out of 10 women stated that nobody helped them while 35% replied that majorly female members of the house either daughter or daughter-in-law helped them.

Also read: [India's Lockdown Is Blind to the Woes of Its Women](#)

Nine out of 10 women informal workers stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased mental stress and tension due to uncertainties of work and income and its impact on access to essential resources and services. 64% of women informal workers suffered from challenges in procuring essential food items during the last six months while 36% stated the difficulties faced in managing their children's education as access to smartphones and recharge of those with sufficient balance is a luxury to them. 32% of women stated that paying rent is another big challenge for them given the drastic fall in income even after the lockdown opened. But they have not received any monetary help from the government during the post-lockdown period and even the credit facility announced by the government for the street vendors is hardly beneficial as they are not in a position to repay the loan.

Similarly, many women construction labourers reported not receiving the compensation amount because of lack of awareness and many women workers discontinued their

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domestic workers and home-
, 53% of them have taken loans either
at an exorbitant interest rate (sometimes
r from their relatives or employers. But
major concern for them and the burden of
interest amount keeps piled up which led them into a vicious
cycle of a debt trap.

It is needless to mention that these informal workers are the backbone of the city and provide many essential services but their work is not recognised and valued, and they do not have any social protection to deal with such an unprecedented situation. They mostly depend on their daily wage earnings for survival so they do not have cash or savings also and they are finding great difficulty in rebuilding their life and livelihood during the post-pandemic period.

Some necessary steps must be taken by the government like extending provisioning of free ration kits for at least six more months or till the time their work normalises, generating more public employment opportunities by expanding National Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes to urban areas along with a reservation of women in this and initiating the registration of women informal workers to the Unorganised Workers Social Security Board and implementing minimum wage for them to bring recognition to the important contributions they make to urban societies.

Shiney Chakraborty is a research analyst at the Institute of Social Studies Trust.

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