

Impact of Covid-19 lockdown on the economic prospects of working women in India: A review

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Abstract - The year 2020 had started on a positive note for this year marked the 110 years of celebrating the International Women's Day. This is also the 25th year of Beijing Platform Action which was designed to bring about monumental outcomes for the mission of achieving gender equality. Instead, the world is grappling with a pandemic which has slowed down and in fact impaired the mission of achieving gender equality across several platforms such as education, nutrition, social and economic status. If the reports and statistics across the globe are considered, the Covid-19 pandemic has single handedly taken us decades behind in terms of gender equality and justice. Women face increased financial instability and threat to their means of livelihood as a result of the current situation. Women, who constitute around 50 percent of the Indian population have remained largely absent from the government's Covid-19 policy. This paper makes an attempt to study the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on the economic status and prospects of the working women in India across various social and economic strata.

keywords - Working Women, Employment, Gender disparities

Purpose of the study:

The pandemic is not gender neutral i.e. it does not discriminate between the different genders. However, on further analysis at different levels like social, economic, development of the society, it can be observed that the pandemic has affected women and men differently due to the difference in their socio-cultural and economic roles. The women constitute a sizeable chunk of the workforce in India. It is very important to understand how the working women will be affected by the blanket lockdown. Organizations and the government cannot afford to be gender neutral in terms of policies and programs and will have to analyze the situation through a gendered lens to be able to generate tailored or customized responses to address these issues

Introduction:

Gender Economics (GE)¹ as a subject provides useful insights into useful to dealing with the Socio-economic and legal issues concerning the women's work life. In the current context the knowledge of Gender Economics will help in understanding and documenting the daily survival struggles of women in her family, in the community, her workplace and in the micro and macro economy of the nation with the aim of understanding the power relations which controls women and her functioning within the four walls of the society with limited access to resources and power.

The Census of India defines work as the participation in any economically productive activity with or without compensation, wages or profit. Such participation may be physical and/ or mental in nature. All persons engaged in 'work' are defined as workers. The reference period for determining whether the person can be termed as a worker is one year preceding the date of enumeration. In context of this study, the women involved in economically productive work have been considered as the subject. As per Census of 2011, the workforce participation rate (WPR)² for females is 25.51% against 53.26% for males. The Rural sector has a better female workforce participation rate of 30.02% compared with 53.03% for males whereas for urban sector. However, these figures have been affected by the lockdown which has witnessed a large number of female workers being laid off or being denied paid work (example domestic helpers).

To analyze the development of women, the WID model i.e. Women in Development³ model tries to explain the reasons for the women being treated as the beneficiaries of the 'left-over 'crumbs, left for them' at the margins of the economy, which reduces their status to being an auxiliary labour force. Gender disparities are measured keeping in mind the three indicators of per capita income, educational attainment and life-expectancy. The pandemic has almost removed all sources of income for the women in both unorganized and organized sectors in India. A large number of

¹Gender Economics describes the economic impact of systems, processes and frameworks which are founded on gender inequities.

²a measure of the proportion of a country's working-age population that engages actively in the labour market, either by working or looking for work; it provides an indication of the size of the supply of labour available to engage in the production of goods and services

³**Women in development (WID)** is an approach of **development** projects that emerged in the 1960s, calling for treatment of **women's** issues in **development** projects. It is the integration of **women** into the global economies by improving their status and assisting in total **development**

young girls have been forced to look after the household chores and caring for the other members of the family instead of studying. With the schools being closed, uncertainty looms as a number of young girls in rural area will be pressurized into getting married and this will affect the literacy rate in the long run. With the Government's attention now being shifted to the controlling of the pandemic, the work that was going on to improve the neo and post-natal health of the women, improvement of the nutritional levels of young girls ,battling issues of minimizing occurrence of anemia etc.have been pushed to the sidelines. Thus, one can observe that with the three indicators being compromised, the gender disparity in the country is on a rise.

Literature review:

After going through a number of literature on the impact of a crisis on the economic and employment status of women, it was observed that the three spheres of finance, production and unpaid care work are interconnected and overlapping. One has to very minutely observe these interconnections and intersections through a feminist lens .Such an analysis will help in understanding the ways of creating more job opportunities and social protection schemes, and better regulation of the finances of the state to aid overall development and economic recovery (UN Women Policy and Programme Bureau, 2014)⁴

The financial and economic crises affects the men and women workers differently for various reasons, which need to be considered in order to get a complete picture. The crisis response strategies adopted by the Governments can have different impacts on its citizens based on the extent of the gender sensitivity of the issue. (Jayati Ghosh 2013)⁵

In a claim made by The Economist, women have been contributing to the expansion of the world economy from the sidelines. The unprecedented numbers of women on the labour-market across different sectors means that there is a direct impact of a country's economic crisis on the women workers and their households where the flow of income will be significantly affected by women losing their employment.

Research Approach:

The study is descriptive in nature. In such type of a research, the main purpose of the study is to describe a situation or present the specific details of the society, a phenomenon etc.in a specific setting. Such research tries to present answers to questions such as “who, when where and how”. The time frame being considered for this study was the lockdown period in India which occurred in different phases starting from 25th March 2020.This study uses ‘Existing statistics research’ as the researcher tries to examine and analyze the data that has been gathered by the Government or independent agencies on the concerned matter.

Findings:

The pandemic has severely affected the women workers in rural areas who were predominantly engaged in occupations such as basket weaving, handicraft, tailoring, forestry (forest related products like honey), sale of fish, livestock and poultry farming. The lock down and social distancing norms have left them with no customers. In the urban areas, the majority of women workers are either in the construction sector as manual labourers doing odd jobs like carrying bricks etc. or in the nursing and teaching professions. Such women who were working either on a contract-basis or were self-employed are the worst hit as they are the first ones to be asked to leave in times of crisis. The women engaged in home-based production units like manufacturing papads or achar, self-employed women, and women entrepreneurs etc. were also affected due to the lack of demand for their products as well as the paucity of raw materials

According to the World Bank estimate, the Covid-19 pandemic will push 60 million people into extreme poverty. This situation has to be observed from the perspectives of the Indian Economy. In order to cope with the situation and to mitigate some of the damage to the economy, the relief package amounting to 20 lakh crores was announced by the Prime Minister on 17th May 2020 .This however amounted to only 1% of the GDP⁶ whereas the World Health Organization had recommended relief package amounting to 10 % of the GDP.Cash transfer of rupees 500 to the Womens' Jan dhan account which was announced by mid-April 2020, is still not completed. According to the recent Dalberg⁷ study, 70% of the eligible women have yet to receive the aforementioned sum of money. These signs indicate the fact that the women are yet to receive help from the Government.

In India, majority of the women are employed in the unorganized⁸ sector. The type of work that these women are employed, lack social security, decent and timely wages, equitable wages and in most of the cases, the women are not even considered as “workers”. For example in sugar manufacturing industries involving the collection of sugarcane and its bye-products, the system of hiring is known as “Jodi” or “in pair” where a couple is hired ,but only the man is considered as the “worker” and the woman, inspite of sharing equal work load are labeled as a “helper”. This leaves them with zero bargaining power and with no access to finances. Women in India with the exception of the North –Eastern States and Andhra Pradesh have lost

⁴Women, U. N. (2014). The global economic crisis and gender equality. *New York: UN Women*.

⁵Ghosh, J. (2013). Economic Crises and Women's Work: Exploring progressive strategies in a rapidly changing global environment'. *UN Women*, 58.

⁶Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the monetary value of all finished goods and services made within a country during a specific period

⁷ A global consultancy firm

⁸The National Commission for Enterprises in Unorganized Sector (NCEUS) defines unorganized/informal sector as consisting of —all unincorporated private enterprises owned by individuals

their customary land right due to the Land Act⁹. Therefore, the women in villages who could have used the ancestral land for farming etc. will have no option to revive themselves economically during this crisis.

As per the Government of India data, the Indian economy has around 8 crore migrant workers out of which 3 crores are women. The pandemic has severely affected these migrant workers who were employed as domestic workers, transport workers, drivers, watchmen, in construction work and predominantly in unorganized informal sectors. In the Indian textile industries, an estimated 50% of the workforce consists of women workers¹⁰. During the pandemic, such women workers have been abandoned by their employers and contractors and even denied their pending wages. Due to the absence of unions, such women workers are the worst hit by the lockdown imposed due to the pandemic. The 'social distancing' has further 'distanced' the rich from the poor.

The Interstate Migration Workman Act, 1979, has been overlooked by the factory owners, industrialists etc. In a recent development, as a part of labour reform initiatives, the Ministry of Labour has decided to amalgamate the existing 44 labour laws into four codes—on wages, industrial relations, social security and safety, health and working conditions. The industrial relations code is the third of four labour codes that has got the approval from the Cabinet. This code does not mention anything about the provisions related to the reproductive health of the women workers and the prevention of sexual harassment at workplace, which were earlier considered by the labour legislations under the purview of legislations such as the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017,¹¹ the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961¹² and the Sexual Harassment of women at workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. This is further worsen the condition of the women workers without proper legal coverage. The pandemic has witnessed the women employees being sacked by the industries in large numbers as they are considered more 'disposable' in comparison to their male counterparts and also axed first as they are not considered 'as the bread winners' of the family.

Post pandemic, the choice of job opportunities will become even more limited for the women workers and they will be forced to take up 'low paying' jobs which are not at par with their experience or credentials. This will further widen the existing 'gender pay gap'. On paper the average Minimum wages¹³ in India is Rupees 370, but in reality, men workers are paid rupees 230 on an average and the women workers get rupees 120. This shows the huge gap or difference in the pay received by the male workers and the female workers in India. The pandemic will widen this 'existing gender pay gap' even further.

Women play a predominant role in health care services. Over 9 lakh women are employed as health care providers in the form of doctors, nurses, ayahs and sanitary workers. Apart from the challenging shift timings during the pandemic and irregular pay in some states, these women frontline workers have higher chances of contracting infection. Apart from this, such health workers are forced to 'socially distance' themselves. In a recent incident, as reported by The Hindu on 10th June 2020, a section of nurses from Government Medical College Hospital in Omandurar Estate, staged a protest citing the shortage of manpower for managing the patients diagnosed with the corona virus. These nurses were overworked, underpaid and under-rested.

Looking at the prospects of Indian women, the good news is that India is expecting record food-grain production at almost 300 million tonnes. An estimated 50 million migrant labourers (of India's 140 million) who have returned to their native places from cities following the nationwide lockdown from March 24 can find work in their villages now. Agriculture may provide work to a large number of women residing in rural areas. This reverse migration due to COVID-19 provides an opportunity for the state governments to engage the returned labourers in gainful employment such as labour intensive sectors like livestock, fisheries and food processing.

Covid-19 has brought about a change of heart among the corporates, who are now introducing "work from home" as a mandatory policy for the time being. This may turn out to be a much needed change, a transformative policy, which may work in the favour of women. As per the report by online career platform JobsForHer, 'Work from home' jobs posted on its platform has seen a 30 % increase in March 2020, as compared to March 2019. The rise has been particularly observed in the cities of Delhi-NCR, Chennai, Mumbai, Pune and Bengaluru. Such "work from opportunities" provide a new lease of life for women wanting to make a comeback after a sabbatical, to fulfill caring responsibilities.

Conclusions:

One has to remember that no aspect of the economic life is gender neutral. This is due to the years of discrimination, lack of opportunities, societal norms etc. which has kept the women from actively participating in the development of the economy of the country. Therefore, ministry at the Centre and State levels must lay emphasis in considering the existing state of affairs of

⁹An Act of Indian Parliament that regulates land acquisition and lays down the procedure and rules for granting compensation, rehabilitation and resettlement to the affected persons in India.

¹⁰Swami, Meenakshi S and Padma, Stanzin, Women in the Informal/Unincorporated Textile Sector of India: Gendered Relationship between Proprietorship, Employment and Types of Enterprises across States (March 3, 2015). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2813632>

¹¹The Maternity (Amendment) Bill 2017, an amendment to the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961

¹²The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 protects the employment of women during the time of her maternity and entitles her of a 'maternity benefit' – i.e. full paid absence from work – to take care for her child. The act is applicable to all establishments employing 10 or more employees.

¹³According to the ILO, Minimum wages have been defined as "the minimum amount of remuneration that an employer is required to pay wage earners for the work performed during a given period, which cannot be reduced by collective agreement or an individual contract"

the issues concerning the women in India. The State needs to give due recognition to the women as 'workers', allocate funds in the budget for supplementary development programs for the women to ensure employability, so that women can overcome the additional financial crisis being brought by the pandemic.

A society can be back on its feet after a major setback if it works on ensuring proper and uninterrupted education of its citizens, hence, Indian government needs to give special emphasis to education to the weaker section of the society and of the women. One major reason for the Indian women's limited access to employment is the lack of education and skills. Although there is a free education policy for girls, but due to the lack of follow up on the number of dropouts, the effectiveness of the policy is debatable. This pandemic will lead to a huge number of girls dropping out from the high school and being married off by their parents. The state has to devise programs and provide some kind of incentives to the girls and their parents to encourage the girls to return to their schools once the schools reopen. The Forum for Crèches and Child Care services (FORCES)¹⁴ has suggested that if one room of the school is converted into crèche, then the girls who are unable to join schools education in order to care for their younger sibling can also join. The governments must seriously consider taking up this proposal to give a boost to the literacy rate of the girls. This step will also help in ensuring the future job prospects of the girl child so that they become employable and are able to cope with similar contingencies in the future. Training for jobs have to be combined with coaching about life-skills, inculcating critical awareness, improving negotiating skills in terms of bargaining better wages etc., generating awareness about savings etc.

The State has to boost the Self Help Groups¹⁵ of women by making micro-credit available and accessible to the women who are from the economic backward sections of the society. This will provide a much needed boost to the self-confidence of such women and motivate them to be independent and self-reliant. Apart from this, the governments (both at the Centre and the States) can reserve some percentage of its housing societies for female headed (eg. Divorced, Separated, Widowed) families to ensure that they have some kind of help in acquiring such properties and are not left homeless due to eviction from rented homes by landlords/landladies. Apart from this, the States can ensure that day cares and crèches are provided in the workplaces so that the working women can resume their duties after the lockdown is over across the nation. This will ensure that the working women do not have to sacrifice their careers in order to fulfill their caring responsibilities as a parent.

Some other ways of ensuring that the future of the working women is made secure during and post pandemic can be increasing the network of ASHA¹⁶ and Anganwadi¹⁷ workers and further strengthen their positions by increasing their pay. This will also provide employment to a large number of women. Activities under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment¹⁸ Guarantee Act should be further promoted. The Minimum wages should be same, irrespective of the gender. This will help in reducing the wage gap. The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976¹⁹ must serve its role of ensuring equal pay for equal work, irrespective of gender. The State Governments must seriously consider the Article 39²⁰ of the Constitution of India. Thus, in conclusion we can say that the combined efforts of the State, the NGOs and the citizens themselves will help in empowering the women both mentally and financially so that they can overcome this situation being created by the pandemic. Such kind of actions will ensure that women actively participate in the nation building economic activities and therefore, lead the country to a better state of existence than the past and the present times alongside their male counterparts.

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¹⁴FORCES is a national network of organizations and individuals concerned with issues relating to women working in the unorganized sector and care of their children.

¹⁵ SHG (self-help group) is a community based group with 10-20 members. They are usually women from similar social and economic backgrounds, all voluntarily coming together to save small sums of money, on a regular basis.

¹⁶Trained female community health activist ASHA or Accredited Social Health Activist. The ASHA are trained to work as an the interface between the community and the public health system

¹⁷Anganwadi is a type of rural child care centre in India. They were started by the Indian government in 1975 as part of the Integrated Child Development Services program to combat child hunger and malnutrition.

¹⁸An Indian labour legislation and social security measure that aims to guarantee the 'right to work'. This act was passed in September 2005. It aims to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

¹⁹An Act to provide for the payment of equal remuneration to men and women workers and for the prevention of discrimination, on the ground of sex, against women in the matter of employment and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.

²⁰According to Article 39 of Indian constitution, The State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing that the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means to livelihood.

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