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GENDER AND ECONOMIC POLICY DISCUSSION FORUM



GENDERED IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
&
THE ASSOCIATED LOCKDOWN:
THE READJUSTMENT OF WOMEN'S LABOUR

ORGANISED BY



IN ASSOCIATION WITH

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CONCEPT
NOTE

This online seminar is being organized to understand the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown on India's workforce.

By March 2020, amidst growing evidence on contraction of industrial production, demand, real GDP and employment over several successive quarters, economists had already forewarned a recession. It was in such a situation that India imposed one of the world's most stringent lockdowns to contain the spread of the coronavirus disease. Whether the lockdown helped achieving this aim is still hotly debated as the infection rates continue to soar in India, however, most experts have no two views regarding the devastating impact of the lockdown on the workforce. Based on data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's (CMIE) Consumer Pyramid Household Survey, it has been estimated that over 120 million people in India lost their jobs in the immediate aftermath of the lockdown. Most of these workers, being migrants employed in the informal economy in cities such as Delhi and Mumbai were displaced from their place of residence owing to conditions of food insecurity, malnutrition, hunger, lack of disposable income and fear of the disease. Many of these effects were notably gendered and affected certain demographics most severely.

ILO reports that unlike other recessions, the COVID crisis and lockdowns imposed across the world has affected sectors which account for a sizeable share of women's employment around the world – accommodation and food services; real estate, business and administrative activities; manufacturing and wholesale/retail trade (ILO, 2020). Moreover, women self-employed workers and entrepreneurs who normally have lesser access to capital and marketing opportunities were also among the worst hit (ibid). In India, women reported 70% lower employment levels in April 2020 when compared to April 2019 (Deshpande, 2020). Workers belonging to Scheduled Caste groups were among the worst affected demographic with April 2020 employment levels being estimated at 64% of the same in 2019 (ibid).



Image Source: *New Indian Express*

SECTORAL IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND LOCKDOWN

Informal economy, constituting up to 90% of total employment in India and an even higher share of total female employment has been devastated by all accounts. Workers in the informal economy have always remained largely invisible to policy or programmatic outreach despite efforts to guarantee their social protection. Majority of informal workers continue to work under limited to no social protection in highly precarious jobs. The diversity of work in the informal economy has meant that each sector faces different and specific challenges.

Sectors such as home-based work and garment work are heavily reliant on seasonal fluctuations in consumer demand for availability of work. During the pandemic, subcontracted homeworkers and garment workers reported complete loss of jobs due to closure of factories and cancellation of orders by buyers. Many of these workers are located under layers of intermediaries and subcontractors owing to which they reported not receiving wages for even work which was completed before the lockdown. WIEGO's rapid assessment study reveals that owing to closure of the tourism industry and cancelling of orders across the garment sector, many self-employed home-based workers faced challenges such as no orders, higher costs

for their raw materials and no markets for finished products (WIEGO, 2020). Moreover, many were unable to collect payments for work completed prior to the lockdown and this has led to them opting for loans from informal lenders at exorbitant interest rates in order to procure cash for daily subsistence. A report from the Asia Floor Wage Alliance has stated that many trade unions worry that the COVID-19 crisis will lead to a spike in child labour, bonded labour and human trafficking, with garment workers moving to other occupations including sex work (AFWA, 2020).

Street Vendors, on the other hand, found it impossible to sell anything owing to shutdown of public spaces and confinement of people into their homes (WIEGO, 2020). In ISST's own rapid assessment survey, many reported facing police brutality and violence during the lockdown while at work. Even in the construction sector, only a fraction of those surveyed by ISST reported having received assistance in the form of cash from the government through the welfare boards. A large majority of construction workers remain unregistered and migrants who were trapped in the city without any income or access to food. In most cases, these conditions have led to a deterioration in well-being of not just the workers themselves, but also their families.

Most women tend to be significant earners for their households and the lockdown has pushed those including dependent members such as differently abled, elderly and children into acute poverty and hunger.

Several other sectors such as waste picking, domestic work and care work revealed challenges that were over and above job loss and income loss. According to the ILO, of the 740 million women working in the informal economy, 42% are found in these sectors which are labelled high-risk, compared to 32% of men (ILO, 2020).

Women in these sectors have faced the double burden of employment loss and increased exposure to infections due to their roles as primary caregivers. They have been at the frontline of efforts to tackle the crises without adequate safety equipment or protocols. Several own account workers in the waste picking sector revealed that they were suffering from both ends. On the one side, access to landfills and waste sites was shut which led to many losing their livelihoods. Even those who managed to collect and segregate any waste did not find any buyers for their products during the lockdown. While on the other side, those who managed to find work were left to choose between earning their daily subsistence and risking infections or remaining isolated and starving. Most

municipalities chose to not recognize households or sites which were infected and did not provide any safety equipment leading to aggravation of risks.

Domestic workers faced similar vulnerabilities. Most lost their jobs and many were not even paid incomes for work done before the lockdown. Many reported receiving negligible support from employers. Live-in domestic workers and care workers were pushed to the frontlines of the fight against the pandemic.



Image Source: Pixabay

IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGING SPATIAL RELATIONS DUE TO THE COVID-19 CRISES

Another aspect which we wish to consider during this discussion is the spatial difference in the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. These differences can be traced across several scales. Firstly, at the national scale, metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad and Pune were among the first hotspots. The shutdown of economic activity pushed many migrant workers to undertake arduous long journeys on foot back to their villages. This was the most immediate and visible spatial rearrangement of labor-capital relations caused by the pandemic.

At the same time, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare have followed a zoning policy to identify the level of contagion across regions. Cities, towns and villages across district were demarcated into red, orange and green zones depending on the number of infections reported. According to this policy, the most economically active growth centers such as cities were placed under the red zone category owing to greater population densities and hence greater infection rates. In the months following the lockdown, the number of red zones and containment zones has steadily increased. However, the closure of big cities first meant a substantial contraction in the availability of markets to sell many kinds of produce. Supply chains spanning across many small towns, peri urban locations and rural areas were affected across sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing. In these months therefore even those areas which had not reported any cases or were in the green zone were already facing significant damage to local economies employing majorly own account workers or family based small or micro enterprises.

Secondly, at the city level, the impact of the pandemic and lockdown have been spatially unequal. Based on many preliminary studies that informal low income settlements including unauthorized colonies, resettlement colonies, slums and pavement dwellers have been the worst affected due to insufficient provision of public services. In ISST's own rapid assessment study, workers revealed that owing to their residence in poorly provisioned informal settlements many households were suffering from chronic hunger and were unable to access food, drinking water,

essential medicines, and even safe toilets. Inaccess to public services including health in many of these peripherally located settlements even meant that there was a spatial difference in people's accessibility to immediate healthcare and hospitals even during the pandemic.

Finally, one big spatial change that was brought on by the lockdown and fear of the pandemic was the retreat of workers, children and everyone into their households. This led to a significant increase in women's unpaid care burdens across the world (ILO, 2020). Even before the pandemic, Indian women approximately spent five hours on an average on unpaid care responsibilities within the household when compared to 30 minutes spent by men. Women's unpaid care burdens were aggravated in low income settlements which were poorly provisioned thereby leading to more time spent by women in accessing basic services such as water, toilets, garbage disposal, cooking fuel and food.



Image Source: [Scroll.in](https://www.scroll.in)

OPENING UP THE WORLD OF WOMEN'S WORK: NOTES FOR A FEMINIST QUEER EVALUATION OF THE COVID-19 IMPACT

Scholars have argued that the world of women's work is to be imagined to hold those sectors of work and economies which are regularly characterized by discriminatory and exploitative terms and conditions owing to hetero-patriarchal distribution of private property, capital resources and finance. Women from socio-politically disadvantaged locations including Dalit and Tribal women, differently abled women, Trans and Intersex individuals have repeatedly held the largest share of insecure and precarious jobs. Many individuals from the trans and intersex communities face discrimination and violence on a daily basis that often prevents them from getting formal education or decent paid work. This has pushed most trans and other queer individuals to find livelihoods in sectors of work such as sex work, begging or pavement dwelling.

Sex workers exist under layers of illegality often under bonded conditions of work that are characterized by high

risk of malnutrition, food insecurity, poverty, drug abuse, violence, STIs and several other health issues. While officially sex work is legal in India a number of related activities such as soliciting in a public place are illegal and punishable by law. Unrecognizing and criminalizing streets as workplaces where usually sex workers find customers makes them highly vulnerable to exploitation and violence (physical, verbal and sexual) even at the hands of law enforcement officials. Such conditions have made sex workers one of the most badly affected group of informal economy workers.

This online seminar aims to open up the discourse around the gendered impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods by trying to understand this in the context of those communities which remain at the periphery of our hetero-patriarchal society. We aim to hear from experts working with queer communities, trans communities, sex workers and other informal economy workers on what's

been their assessment of the COVID- 19 impact taking into account both sectoral and spatial level factors.

More closely, we aim to understand from them how a recovery plan that takes into account intersections of caste, gender and queerness should look like. Our objective is to gather evidence on what has worked in mitigating risks and what demands must be made at the policy level for the development of a faster and more sustainable recovery plan that can eventually lead to secure decent livelihoods for these communities.

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