

It is getting from bad to worse for women workers

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In the pandemic, women have borne a disproportionate burden of the severe disruptions to life and the economy

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The COVID-19 pandemic has destroyed millions of livelihoods and led to a sudden and large increase in poverty and a massive disruption of the labour market in India. Women workers, in particular, have borne a disproportionate burden. As the country meets the challenge of the second wave of the pandemic, it is crucial to learn lessons from the first wave to chart the policy path

ahead.

A widening gap

Even prior to 2020, the gender employment gap was large. Only 18% of working-age women were employed as compared to 75% of men. Reasons include a lack of good jobs, restrictive social norms, and the burden of household work. Our recently released report, *State of Working India 2021: One Year of Covid-19* shows that the pandemic has worsened the situation.

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The nationwide lockdown hit women much harder than men. Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd. show that 61% of male workers were unaffected during the lockdown while only 19% of women experienced this kind of security. Even by the end of the year, 47% of employed women who had lost jobs during the lockdown, had not returned to work. The equivalent number for men was only 7%.

Men who did lose work were able to regain it, even if it was at the cost of increased precarity or lower earnings, because they had the option of moving into fallback employment arrangements. Thus, 33% of formal salaried men moved into self employment and 9% into daily wage work between late 2019 and late 2020. In contrast, women had far fewer options — only 4% and 3% of formal salaried women moved into self employment and daily wage work, respectively. Nearly half of the women workers, irrespective of whether they were salaried, casual, or self-employed, withdrew from the workforce, as compared to only 11% of men.

Even as new entrants to the workforce, women workers had poorer options compared to men. Women were more likely to enter as daily wage workers while men found avenues for self-employment. Daily wage work is typically far less remunerative than self employment as on average, between September to October 2020, a daily wage worker earned about ₹7,965 compared to a self-employed worker who earned nearly twice that at ₹12,955. So, not only did women enter into more precarious work, it was also likely to be at very low earnings compared to men.

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Women tended to lose work disproportionately irrespective of the industry in which they were employed. For instance, the share of women in job losses in education was three times their share in that industry. So, while around 20 out of 100 workers in education were women, amongst those who lost work, about 70 out of 100 were women. Similarly, in the health sector, 40 out of 100 workers were women, while of the 100 in this sector who lost work, 80 were women.

Growing domestic work

With schools closed and almost everyone limited to the confines of their homes, household responsibilities increased for women. Married women and women from larger households were less likely to return to work, suggesting that the burden of care may be a reason for poor employment recovery. But even for those women who managed to remain employed, this came alongside a massive increase in the burden of household work. The India Working Survey 2020 found that among employed men, the number of hours spent on paid work remained more or less unchanged after the pandemic. But for women, the number of hours spent in

domestic work increased manifold. In February-March, about 10%-20% of women reported spending between two to four hours on domestic work. This share had increased to about 50% by September. This increase in hours came without any accompanying relief in the hours spent on paid work.

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The course to take

The long-standing question of women's participation in India's economy has become more urgent with the pandemic disproportionately impacting women's paid work and increasing the burden of unpaid care work. The following measures are needed now: expansion of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the introduction of an urban employment guarantee targeted to women as soon as the most severe forms of mobility restrictions are lifted.

We further propose co-ordinated efforts by States to facilitate employment of women while also addressing immediate needs through the setting up of community kitchens, prioritising the opening of schools and *anganwadi* centres, and engagement with self-help groups for the production of personal protective equipment kits. Further, a COVID-19 hardship allowance of at least ₹5,000 per month for six months should be announced for 2.5 million accredited social health activists and Anganwadi workers, most of whom are women.

But this is not enough. The National Employment Policy, currently in the works, should systematically address the constraints around the participation of the women's workforce, both with respect to the availability of work and household responsibilities. The pandemic has shown the necessity of adequate public investment in social infrastructure.

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The time is right to imagine a bold universal basic services programme that not only fills existing vacancies in the social sector but also expands public investments in health, education, child and elderly care, and so on, to be prepared for future shocks. This can help bring women into the workforce not only by directly creating employment for them but also by alleviating some of their domestic work burdens, while also overcoming nutritional and educational deficits that we are likely to be confronted with as we emerge from this crisis.

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