

The COVID-19 Lockdown Will Ravage Prospects for India's Female Workforce

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A homeless woman cooks food at a roadside, during the complete lockdown to contain the coronavirus spread, in Chennai, Thursday, March 26, 2020. Photo: PTI

analysis

Women

Women are more likely to be employed in non-mobile sectors and are also be more prone to dismissal as they are seen as 'less productive' than men.

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Women

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The coronavirus pandemic will almost certainly exacerbate existing inequalities in society. We are already bearing witness to how social distancing and lockdown are panning out across India. The relatively better off can afford to lockdown. They have money to stock up; paying jobs that are mostly secure and even if they are not, the loss of a couple of months of salary does not force them to make hard choices affecting their survival in any way. For poorer people, both the economic and health implications of the coronavirus outbreak are far more serious with survival at stake for many.

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Much has been written about the impact on migrants and the informal sector, particularly as horror stories emerged about mass migration across the country since the lockdown. But the other dimension of inequality that is likely to be impacted but has received less coverage is that along the lines of gender. While all vulnerable populations will suffer, a gender lens is warranted as women, in particular, are ranked lowest in the hierarchy of caste, class or religious stratification. Gender inequality in labour force participation, wages, the burden of care, household work and sharing of resources could be substantially altered due to the crisis. Based on our research, we know that women show higher deprivation along certain dimensions even within non-poor households.

While there is a lot of uncertainty about the global and national trajectory of coronavirus and how it will impact the economy and society, lessons from previous crises can provide a rough blueprint of what to expect and how to deal with it.

Care economy

One of the immediate impacts of the pandemic is the increased care responsibility on women. Even before the lockdown, the mass closure of schools and daycare impacted both homemakers and women participating in the labour force. Women already bear a disproportionate burden of the care economy (taking care of children, elderly and other household duties) even when they are participating in the labour market. This burden just got heavier with the closure of schools. Caring for elderly is also likely to increase as hospitals are overworked with many cases being treated at home. Unless men step up and share a chunk of the household work, the situation for women will only worsen.

[Also read: The Lockdown is Making Gender Inequality More Discernable](#)

Labour force participation

Women's greater involvement in the care economy could also impact their labour force participation rate, which according to official statistics is fairly low (23% in 2017-18). Independent of the care economy, both men and women's employment will certainly be impacted as the Indian economy is expected to go into a severe downturn. Given that some forms of social distancing guidelines are likely to be in place longer than the lockdown, jobs in sectors that require close human interaction like construction, retail and most of the informal sector would suffer more than sectors like technology and formal sectors where distancing is feasible.



Women sit near a window during a nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the coronavirus pandemic, at Sion in Mumbai, Saturday, April 11, 2020. Photo: PTI

Women are more likely than men to be employed in such non-mobile sectors and hence will bear a higher burden of the slowdown. This is in sharp contrast to war economies of World War II which led to a sharp sustained spike in women's labour force participation the absence of men.

Also, employers, whether in the formal or informal sector, as they grapple with the economic downturn, may be more inclined to lay off women as they are seen as 'less productive' than men and not as the primary breadwinners of the family and hence more easily disposable. Women employees in the formal sector may also be viewed as being costly, post the Maternity Act that entitles women to six months paid leave. This Act, while correct in its intentions, is flawed in its implementation as there is no government support for paid leave.

It is possible that women may temporarily flock to the labour market to sustain their basic livelihood, similar to what was seen in rural areas in 2004-05 due to agrarian distress. Distress induced employment is hardly likely to improve the situation. Women may be forced to accept lower wages, work longer hours or face layoffs as there would be a desperate pool of labour that may be willing to work at very low wages.

A positive side-effect of the pandemic, could be that employers start offering more flexible and work-at-home options to their employees. This would help educated women enter and stay in the labour force and not be forced to drop out after child-birth, though the long-term implications for career progression will be unclear in this option.

Also read: Has Quarantine Broken the Severely Coded Gendered Roles of Domestic Labour?

Violence against women (VAW)

There is evidence globally to show that emergencies increase the risk of intimate partner violence due to women's inability to leave their abusers. According to NFHS 4 data, 31% of ever-married Indian women have experienced some form of spousal violence. One of the drivers of VAW is the sense of powerlessness among men and the perception of diminished masculinity. It is likely that the recession, economic stress and likely high unemployment levels could result in greater violence within the household and more generally, against women in the society.

Resource allocation: food, education and health

Economic constraints may force poorer households at the margin to make tough choices that seem efficient but are also culturally sanctioned under a patriarchal setup. As incomes shrink, men and boys may be prioritised for availing resources instead of women and girls. This could have implications for food security, health and education of women and girls.

Indian women are already more likely to be malnourished than men, and about 53% are anaemic. Such choices could deepen health inequities even further. If young women do not get enough to eat, in addition to being underweight, it could disadvantage an entire future generation of children. Girls may be forced to drop out of school earlier than boys due to education-related expenses or to tend to household responsibilities, they may be married off at a younger age with implications for their health and a consequent loss of their agency.



A family of a migrant worker sits along a highway as they wait for a bus to return to their village, during a 21-day nationwide lockdown to limit the spreading of coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in Ghaziabad, on the outskirts of New Delhi, India, March 29, 2020. Photo: Reuters/Adnan Abidi

Women's empowerment

Economic empowerment for women is the cornerstone of gender equality; erosion of income generation activities for women can have negative implications on other aspects of women's agency, particularly within the household. It can impact health-seeking ability, decision making within the household, as well as their ability to protect themselves from VAW.

What can governments do?

The pandemic and the associated economic distress is at an early stage, with a lot of uncertainty so it is difficult to predict its impacts. But we can certainly anticipate certain potential negative fallouts, plan and prepare for it. Now is the time to increase state support for welfare schemes and safety net measures to relieve widespread economic stress. Specifically for women, MGNREGA spending should be substantially increased as we know women participate in it in higher numbers than men and wage inequality between men and women's wages in MGNREGA is far lower than in other jobs.

[Also read: South Asian Domestic Violence Survivors in Silicon Valley Grapple With COVID-19 Lockdown](#)

There is a need to strengthen and empower local governance systems. Many response initiatives have to be local so that interventions can be identified on a context and need bases. Decentralised and sex-disaggregated data collection and monitoring on various aspects like girls attendance in secondary schools, instances of domestic violence, women's labour force participation should be substantially strengthened. Corrective measures can be taken in time if worsening is observed. For example, school principals can be asked to follow up when they notice girls dropping out of school.

The network of ASHA and Anganwadi workers should be strengthened by increasing their pay as these are first responders in this crisis. They can spread information about the pandemic in communities, monitor nutrition and health, ensure food provision for vulnerable households and provide counselling and help for victims of domestic violence. For this, the government must immediately increase their compensation and provide them with benefits at par with that of government employees. The network of ASHA and Anganwadi workers can be asked to inquire informally about instances of domestic stress and violence and also reach out to the men in the community.

It is imperative that our policy-makers adopt a gender perspective to understanding and analysing the effects of the coronavirus outbreak and the lockdown on the economy, livelihoods and social structures. A first step to that end would be evolving a gender-appropriate response that leaves no one behind.

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