

Advancing gender equality in a post COVID context



**Gender sensitive policies to
enhance food security and
expand wage employment**

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all Indians, particularly vulnerable groups, including women and girls. If evidence from previous disasters and health crises is any indication, women will be disproportionately affected during this pandemic¹. Within homes, women and girls who already do more than six times unpaid work than men, now shoulder added responsibilities of feeding and caring for children who are not going to schools as well as care work for the elderly, sick or disabled family members².

Outside their homes, shrinking employment opportunities and the resultant loss in bargaining power has compounded the problems faced by women. The decline in decent work opportunities and loss of income can, among other things, lead to a loss of independence, agency, and undo several years of progress achieved through gender-responsive policies. Such losses may also make it more difficult for women to escape situations of domestic violence.³ The dangers faced by frontline workers, a majority of whom are women, is another source of worry created by the pandemic.

These problems are expected to put additional pressure on the existing ailing economy. Even before the pandemic began, the Indian economy had been beset by falling investment and low growth⁴. Rural India, in particular, had been suffering from agrarian distress⁵ which had affected livelihoods significantly.

The disproportionate impact on women and girls calls for more gender-responsive interventions and relief measures. It is becoming increasingly important to expand opportunities for wage employment and enhance food security and nutrition. Evidence shows a clear co-relation between food and nutrition insecurity and gender inequalities, with mothers and daughters usually eating last as well as the least nutritious food in Indian households.⁶

Therefore, expanding social security benefits, improving access to and availability of employment and decent work opportunities, particularly for women, can help address

nutritional and food security challenges during the pandemic.⁷

Expanding wage employment opportunities for women

With the lockdown substantially reducing economic activity, the women's workforce, 90 per cent⁸ of which is in the informal sector, will continue to face difficulties in finding sustainable livelihood and employment opportunities, as the economy takes time to recover⁹. It is estimated that 13.6 crore non-agricultural jobs are at an immediate risk¹⁰, potentially further lowering the female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) of 25.3 per cent.¹¹

In cities, this translates into catastrophic wage losses, including for women migrants who are usually construction/domestic/garment workers or unskilled manual labourers¹². Going by media reports, even formal employment of women in several sectors seems to have been adversely affected.

In rural areas, reverse migration of labourers from cities is expected to increase the burden of women's unpaid work. Women may be further pushed out of agricultural work while losing jobs to men returning from the cities¹³. Women may also see reduced cash flow due to reduction in remittances and have lesser say in intrahousehold decision making.

Other livelihood opportunities for rural women are also likely to be impacted. For example, income opportunities for tribal women have diminished during the COVID-19 crisis because of closure of weekly haats where they sell Minor Forest Produce (MFP), especially given that March-June is the blooming season of one of the major MFPs, the mahua flower¹⁴.

These challenges have resulted in an increased demand for local employment. India's largest public works programme, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)¹⁵, is now seeing a significant rise in demand from returning migrants and those with no source of income.¹⁶

¹ <https://blog.cafindia.org/disasters-disproportionally-affect-women-and-girls-unpacking-gendered-nature-of-disasters/>

² <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/22/commentary/gender-responsive-policy-and-fiscal-response.html>

³ <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/a-gendered-view-of-the-covid-19-crisis/article31404869.ece>

⁴ <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-06-26/india-s-investment-crisis-exacerbates-covid-19-gdp-slowdown>

⁵ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/agriculture/agrarian-crisis-one-of-the-biggest-challenges-for-new-govt-64736>

⁶ <http://www.wocan.org/sites/default/files/Gender%20and%20FS%20in%20Brief.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/file/Gender%20Justice%20and%20Food%20Security%20in%20India.pdf>

⁸ <https://thewire.in/women/indian-women-work-care-informal-sector>

⁹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explainspeaking-why-in-a-crisis-we-need-to-look-at-absolute-level-of-gdp-more-than-growth-rates-6480633/>

¹⁰ <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/a-gendered-view-of-the-covid-19-crisis/article31404869.ece>

¹¹ As per the NSSO Employment-Unemployment Situation Report 2011/12. The female LFPR seems to have reduced further and stands at 17.5% as per PLFS 2017/18.

¹² <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/22/commentary/gender-responsive-policy-and-fiscal-response.html>

¹³ <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1518099>

¹⁴ <https://thewire.in/labour/budget-2020-nirmala-sitharaman-mgnrega>

¹⁵ <https://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/home.aspx>

¹⁶ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/job-demand-household-coverage-under-mgnregs-hit-a-new-high/articleshow/76251418.cms>

There is an urgent need for a gender-responsive strategy for MGNREGA to ensure that women are not denied decent work opportunities under the scheme. Evidence suggests that a gender-responsive public works programme like MGNREGA can lead to improvements in health, food security, consumption, nutrition, and can have a range of multiplier effects on the local economy.^{17,18}

Recognising the growing demand for work under MGNREGA, the Government of India (GOI) has already increased funding for the scheme by Rs. 40,000 crore for FY2020-21 (from Rs.61,500 crores to Rs.1.05 lakh crores). However, such an increase may still not be enough to meet the additional demand for work created by the COVID-19 lockdown. According to the NREGA Sangarsha Morcha, a national platform of workers' collectives, an allocation of a minimum of Rs. 1 lakh crore is required to ensure smooth functioning of the scheme under normal circumstances. However, after budgeting for pending dues from last year (around Rs. 10,000 crore), and even after adding the new allocation of Rs. 40,000 crore, the total funds available for MGNREGA in FY 2020-21 will only be Rs. 90,000 crores, still short of the estimate of Rs. 1 lakh crore required under normal circumstances.¹⁹

Lack of adequate funding for MGNREGA is likely to disproportionately affect women. Data suggests that almost 55 per cent of all person-days created under MGNREGA over the period 2017-19 have been availed by women.²⁰ MGNREGA has helped stem the decline in women's labour force participation²¹ and reduced the gender differential in wages for casual work by increasing female wages. Additionally, with the government allowing MGNREGA works on private property of SC and ST households, as well as for beneficiaries of land reforms, it has led to asset creation for the disadvantaged groups, thereby augmenting their income.

It is also known that when women are organised in collectives and work with local institutions such as Panchayati Raj Institutions to support implementation and monitoring of MGNREGA, it results in both better economic and empowerment outcomes^{22,23}.

Therefore, to alleviate the problems created by the pandemic and the lockdown, and to ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable are able to recover and build resilient lives and livelihoods, the following recommendations and best practices from various states can be considered:

1. Increase the number of work-days for each household to 200 days. This is an important step as reports suggest that over 14 lakh destitute families have already completed their quota of 100 days of work under MGNREGA in 2020²⁵. There is also an immediate need to issue individual job cards for all rural household members, especially for female headed households.
2. If possible, ensure that 50 per cent of worksites under MGNREGA are all-women worksites. Similar successful models have been tried and tested in many states²⁶ and included training women supervisors or 'mates' for managing the worksites²⁷.
3. Consider instituting gender-responsive Schedule of Rates (SORs) – or differential payment brackets to factor in disadvantaged women and to create enabling conditions of work for women.
4. Focus on enrolling and creating jobs for single women and those from disadvantaged groups such as SC, ST, PVTG²⁸, among others.
5. Ensure convergence of MGNREGA with other schemes that benefit the rural population like the National Rural Livelihood Mission³⁰, Swachh Bharat Mission²⁹, etc. Specific examples of such convergences are mentioned in the recommendation that follow.
6. Publish list of work appropriate for women as well as a list of community assets that reduce gender vulnerabilities, for e.g. social forestry, investments in improved water collection sources, community sanitation facilities, etc. In this regard, the initiative taken by the Muzaffarpur district administration in Bihar in using women job card holders to sustain a plantation drive in the district is laudable and can serve as a model project that may be replicated³¹. Another example is an initiative of the district administration of Nadia, West Bengal to converge elements of MGNREGA, Swachh Bharat Mission and NRLM to help build

¹⁷ <http://www.environmentportal.in/files/Empowerment%20Effects%20of%20the%20NREGS.pdf>

¹⁸ Macro-Economic of MGNREGA in India: An Analysis in GCE Modelling Framework, AK Sharma et al, 2017.

¹⁹ <https://thewire.in/labour/budget-2020-nirmala-sitharaman-mgnrega>

²⁰ https://nrega.nic.in/Circular_Archive/archive/MGNREGA_PerformanceReport27June2016.pdf

²¹ <http://ftp.iza.org/dp6548.pdf>, Pg.20

²² <http://ftp.iza.org/dp6548.pdf>, Pg.20

²³ <https://ipcig.org/pub/IPCPovertyInFocus27.pdf>

²⁴ <https://core.ac.uk/reader/43538920>

²⁵ https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/amid-demand-surge-14-lakh-families-have-reached-annual-mgnrega-work-limit/article32006305.ece/amp/?homepage=true&__twitter_impression=true

²⁶ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/10/changing-the-landscape-with-all-women-worksites-in-india>

²⁷ https://nrega.nic.in/Circular_Archive/archive/MGNREGA_Sameeksha2_English.pdf

²⁸ Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups.

²⁹ <https://nrlm.gov.in/>

³⁰ <https://swachhbharatmission.gov.in/>

³¹ https://nrega.nic.in/Circular_Archive/archive/Proto_type_road_side_plantation_based_Muzaffarpur_model.pdf

community toilets. The building of sanitation infrastructure under this initiative has led to Nadia being declared open defecation free and has also reduced vulnerabilities for a majority of the women who had no access to sanitation facilities³².

7. Strictly enforce the provision requiring crèche facilities at worksites and explore possibility of integrating ICDS infrastructure for child care facilities under MGNREGA³³. Facilities provided at worksites in Mahabnagar district of Telangana can be emulated in this regard³⁴.

8. Integrate the role of women's collectives, including SHGs, in working directly with PRIs for demand generation of works under MGNREGA, in enrolling the most vulnerable, for managing worksites and other logistics of implementation, as has been done in Kerala where Kudumbashree SHGs were involved in MGNREGA administration³⁵. These groups can also assist the PRIs in conducting social audits mandated under MGNREGA.

9. Use MGNREGA to build assets that can be used by SHGs. For example, construction of common assets permissible under MGNREGA for the benefit of SRLM compliant SHGs as practiced in Mizoram³⁶ or setting up Cluster Facilitation Teams to integrate needs of SRLM compliant SHGs and MGNREGA job card holders as done in Ranibandh block of Bankura Distt., West Bengal³⁷.

10. Separately, innovations like starting an urban employment guarantee scheme to reduce reverse migration³⁸ and initiating bank loans for individuals against future MGNREGA earnings³⁹ can be considered. Additionally, time-motion studies can be commissioned to develop appropriate Schedule of Rates (SORs) to promote work that is convenient for women, specifically in the context of distress and burden of unpaid care work.

Food and Nutrition Security

Apart from the decline in employment and wage opportunities, there is an immediate concern about access to ration for women who may not be eligible for benefits under the National Food Security Act and the Public Distribution System

(PDS) due to lack of documentation or not being in their home states.⁴⁰ It is estimated that approximately 7 crore women live in households without ration cards. Such hindrances in the food distribution chain, especially when income is curtailed, can lead to reduced food security for families, the burden for which again disproportionately falls on women. As highlighted previously, due to prevailing social norms, women usually eat last, and often the least nutritious food in times of shortages⁴¹.

Studies suggest that households are coping with COVID-19 by (i) eating fewer times; (ii) consuming smaller quantities as well as lower nutritional quality food; and (iii) becoming increasingly dependent on the Public Distribution System⁴². A survey conducted by the Azim Premji University regarding the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on households in India suggests that 77 per cent of surveyed households are eating less food than before and 47 per cent of surveyed households do not have enough money to buy even a week's worth of essentials⁴³. Given the prevailing social norms and the secondary status accorded to women in many Indian households, such dynamics might exacerbate the already high incidence of malnutrition among women⁴⁴ in India.

Food shortages aside, even the current package offered by the PDS seems inadequate in terms of meeting nutritional requirements of families. A study by SEWA conducted among their members across the country shows that only 11 per cent of women found their ration food package adequate⁴⁵. According to the survey, women who did avail of their PDS benefits were often disappointed, either because only rice and grain were being given with no pulses, or because the grain was not milled, or the amounts were not adequate or as promised, and there was little certainty if more would come through in subsequent months⁴⁶. Such issues compound the problems with respect to nutrition that many women in India already face. According to NFHS-4, around 23 per cent of women suffer from malnutrition (low BMI) and 11 per cent are below 145 cms in height. Therefore, adequate supply through PDS, awareness of nutritional requirements (proteins, micronutrients like iron

³² <https://www.firstpost.com/india/toilets-march-bengals-nadia-district-swachh-bharat-without-extra-funds-2058633.html>

³³ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/documents/mgnrega_final_.pdf

³⁴ http://nirdpr.org.in/nird_docs/rss/RS%2098.pdf, Page 66

³⁵ http://www.kudumbashree.org/storage/files/y8osd_mgnregs%20in%20kerala.pdf

³⁶ <https://srlm.mizoram.gov.in/post/farm-livelihoods-convergence/convergence-with-mgnrega-and-other-line-departments>

³⁷ <https://www.pradan.net/sampark/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/THE-NRLM-MGNREGS-CFT-Convergence-Project-A-Weapon-For-Change.pdf>

³⁸ https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/SWI2019_Urban_Job_Guarantee.pdf

³⁹ <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/mgnregs-too-can-be-bankrolled/article31732945.ece>

⁴⁰ <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/coronavirus-india-lockdown-food-relief-poor-migrant-workers-mass-exodus-essential-commodities-supply-6403528/>

⁴¹ <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/When-women-eat-last/article16978948.ece>

⁴² <https://iwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Voices-from-the-Field-com.pdf>

⁴³ <https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/covid19-analysis-of-impact-and-relief-measures/>

⁴⁴ <https://gender.cgjar.org/covid-19-opens-unknown-chapter-on-rural-womens-plight-in-indias-migration-saga/>

⁴⁵ https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/Gendered_Precarity_SB_Lockdown.pdf

⁴⁶ https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/Gendered_Precarity_SB_Lockdown.pdf

and zinc etc.) as well as access to foods offering the same, must be increased.

While Government of India (GoI) has already announced some measures for migrant workers - 5 kgs of food grains and 1 kg of chana for free per month, till the end of August⁴⁷, as well as the 'one nation one ration card' scheme with 100 per cent national portability by March 31, 2021. However, it will take time to implement it at scale and restore food supply to the most vulnerable, especially in the short term. The 'one nation one ration card' scheme will need at least 10 months, by the government's own estimate, for full operationalisation. And in the short term, hiccups in beneficiary identification by state governments and demand supply mismatches at individual fair price shops are likely to leave many vulnerable families stranded.

The abovementioned problems are likely to be compounded because the safety net of hot cooked meals under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and the mid-day meal (MDM) scheme for vulnerable groups like pregnant women and lactating mothers⁴⁸ and children has also been impacted due to the closure of anganwadi centres and schools during the lockdown. This potentially impacts 7.86 crore children and 1.86 crore pregnant women or lactating mothers, who currently benefit under ICDS and MDM. Needless to say, the work of cooking and feeding the children at home is an additional responsibility that is likely to burden women and girls.

Given the above, the government can pay special attention to the needs of women and children while making provisions of food security.

1. Home delivery of hot cooked meals for ICDS beneficiaries, through decentralised community kitchens run by SHGs can be considered, as has been done in the case of Odisha and Telangana. Besides better nutrition outcomes, this can also generate local employment and enterprise opportunities for women and their collectives. These efforts should be complemented with providing seed grants to women's collectives, and ensuring regular payments to collectives that cook food at anganwadis (or other common places) for community feeding.

2. Additionally, state governments can, include eggs and milk in the ICDS food basket to add much needed nutrition in diets of pregnant

and lactating women as well as young children. This has been implemented in Karnataka. Take-home-ration and hot cooked meals could also be provided to children through doorstep delivery.

3. Moreover, the government can also consider expanding the food package under PDS to include salt, oil, sugar, additional pulses, and vegetables. Kerala has been providing an expanded food package, including soap, salt and oil to the needy. Not only will this ease the burden on vulnerable families by reducing the demand on their household budgets to make additional purchases, it will also fortify the diets of undernourished women and children in the families.

4. GoI has also extended the free food entitlements for PDS cardholders under the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana till November, 2020. Similarly, the measure for free food for migrants (non-PDS cardholders or PDS cardholders of different jurisdictions) can be extended beyond August, preferably for at least three more months, while ensuring universal access to food to avoid people falling out of the social security net due to errors in beneficiary identification or lack of requisite documentation. Temporary ration cards could also be provided to anyone wanting to enter the PDS beneficiary list to tide over the food crisis created by the pandemic. Additionally, expansion of the ration card list through identification of poor families outside the PDS net can be taken up; reports suggest that outdated Census figures have led to the exclusion of over 10 crore beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act⁴⁹. SHG networks can also be leveraged for this purpose as has been done by the Bhagalpur district administration in Bihar⁵⁰.

Conclusion

It is clear that applying a gender lens to existing social protection programmes such as MGNREGA, ICDS, PDS can have a positive impact on wages, food and nutritional security, while alleviating problems that are invariably going to be exacerbated for women during the COVID-19 crisis. Best practices from across states, some of which have been mentioned above, can be leveraged to address the challenges in implementation. Through such measures and interventions, the government can not only combat the COVID-19 crisis but also improve the socio-economic outcomes for women and girls.

⁴⁷ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1637591>

⁴⁸ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/lockdown-ncw-receives-315-domestic-violence-complaints-in-april/article31497599.ece>

⁴⁹ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/outdated-census-data-deprives-over-10-crore-of-pds-economists/article31350648.ece>

⁵⁰ <https://www.livehindustan.com/bihar/bhagalpur/story-jeevika-daadi-will-go-door-to-door-survey-of-ration-card-3164455.html>

This analysis has been authored by Deepto Guha and Rohit Kumar. The authors are researchers at The Quantum Hub (TQH), a public policy research and communications consultancy based out of New Delhi. Valuable feedback and inputs were provided by Aasha Kapur Mehta, Visiting Professor and Head, Centre for Gender Studies, Institute for Human Development; Kanika Jha Kingra, Senior Policy and Advocacy Manager, IWWAGE and Sona Mitra, Principal Economist, IWWAGE.

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IWWAGE – An Initiative of LEAD at Krea University

Block M 6, Second Floor, Kharera, Hauz Khas New Delhi, Delhi—110016

+91 11 4909 6529 | www.iwwage.org

