

# COVID-19 and Women's Labour Crisis

## Reiterating an Inclusive Policy Response

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The COVID-19 pandemic in India has had an unequal impact on women in a number of ways. In terms of economic opportunity, it has been seen that more women lost jobs compared to men and fewer have been able to rejoin labour force. This is in the context of gendered labour markets where female labour force participation has been low and declining. This paper presents an analysis of the situation of women's employment pre-lockdown and some indications on what the impact of COVID-19 could be, based on microstudies and other literature available. Further, the adequacy of the social protection and employment generation programmes of the government that are specifically aimed at improving female labour force participation is assessed.

For women, who have been marginalised in most parts of the developing world throughout the period of globalisation, the pandemic has significantly increased the unequal nature of development. There is ample evidence which shows that women are more adversely affected than men by the social and economic effects of infectious disease outbreaks. They bear the greater brunt of household and care responsibilities, such as closure of schools, caring for the sick and elderly family members, and they are also at greater risk of domestic violence. Women remain disproportionately disadvantaged by reduced access to healthcare services and are deprived of proper nutritional intake during pandemics that impact food security provisions of the population (Wenham 2020).

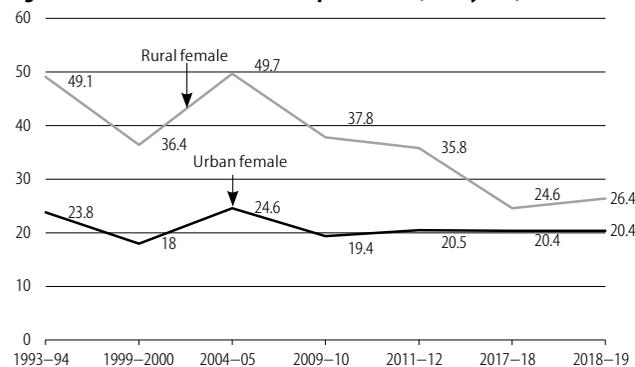
A pandemic that translates itself into an economic crisis has the potential to push women out of the labour force through several mechanisms. An economic crisis creates pressure on governments to cut down on social sector expenditures which potentially increases the burden of unpaid care and household work for women. As a result, women's time for engaging in productive work gets reduced, having a negative impact on their labour force participation.

COVID-19 in India has been no different in these aspects. Women bear the brunt of relatively higher loss of earnings/incomes and are prone to greater job losses than men. There has been an unprecedented increase in the burden of household and care work for women with the additional responsibilities towards catering to returnee migrants and providing food to family, resulting in women's working hours per day increasing substantially (UN women resources 2020).

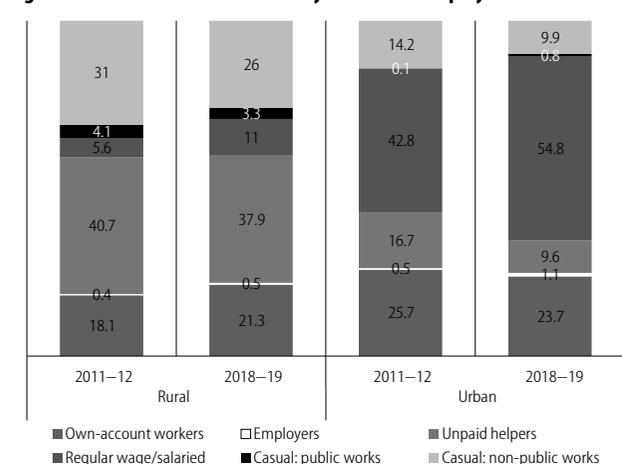
In the context of the long-standing debate in India on the low and declining female labour force participation, it is also important to understand how the pandemic would further affect these trends. These are also relevant for better policy responses towards increasing women's employment. Although nationally representative data are not yet available to assess the employment and income situation of women post the pandemic and lockdowns in India, it is important to understand the circumstances of women's participation in the labour markets pre-pandemic. Therefore, this paper presents an analysis of the situation of women's employment pre-lockdown and some indications on what the impact of COVID-19 could be, based on microstudies and other literature available. Further, the adequacy of the social protection and employment generation programmes of the government that are specifically aimed at improving female labour force participation (FLFP) is assessed.

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**Figure 1: Female Labour Force Participation Rate (>=15 years)**



**Figure 2: Status of Women Workers by Contract of Employment**



Sources: Employment and unemployment in India, NSSO 2013; PLFS 2018-19, NSSO 2020.

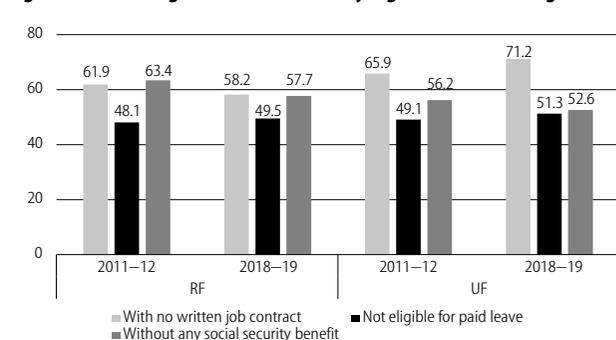
**Women Workers in India: A Gendered Labour Market**

The discussions around low and declining women’s labour force participation in India has been an important issue for most feminist conversations in the last few years. Despite favourably declining fertility rates, improving educational outcomes for girls and moderate rates of economic growth between 2000 and 2012, women’s labour force participation showed substantial declines, especially in rural areas where there has been a rapid decline of women workers in agriculture. As seen in Figure 1, the labour force participation rate (LFPR) for women (above 15 years of age) has come down in rural areas from 35.8% in 2011-12 to only 26.4% in 2018-19 and continues to be low and stagnant in urban areas.

Even among those women who are employed, they are over-represented in low-income insecure jobs in the informal sector with little access to social protection, minimum wages or decent conditions of work. Most women in self-employment work as unpaid helpers in family enterprises or in own account enterprises without any hired workers, and only very few are employers (Figure 2). Self-employment is largely in the form of unpaid work on family farms and enterprises revealing its gendered nature.

A significant proportion of self-employed women workers remain engaged in agriculture, although there is some change in the distribution over the last two decades with the share in agriculture declining from 81% to 68% over 1993-2019, and

**Figure 3: Share of Regular Women Workers by Eligibilities for Non-wage Benefits**



Sources: PLFS 2018-19, NSSO 2020.

**Table 1: Distribution of Female Self-employed Workers by Sectors—All India**

	1993-94	2011-12	2018-19
Agriculture and allied	80.5	71.6	67.9
Manufacturing	10.4	17.6	17.8
Retail trade	4.2	5.5	8.5
Education	0.3	1.0	1.0
Rest of the others	4.6	4.2	4.8

Sources: Unit-level estimates, EUS 1993-94 and 2011-12, NSSO, GOI and PLFS 2018-19.

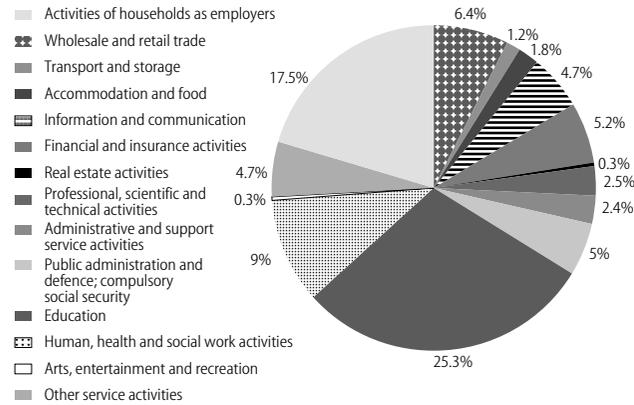
increasing in manufacturing, retail trade and education over the same period (Table 1). This coincides with a rise in the number of women home-based workers in manufacturing (Raveendran et al 2013; Mitra 2018). Such work is often preferred

by women as it enables them to attend to their domestic responsibilities of unpaid care work.

While women in casual work in rural areas consist of manual labour in agriculture and construction, including Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) activities, the increase in regular work for women signals increased continuity in earnings for women in wage employment. However, the PLFS 2018-19 shows that the share of regular women workers with no written job contract, paid leaves and social security benefits is substantial; more importantly in urban areas where more than half the women workers are in regular employment. More than 70% of urban and almost 60% of rural women workers in regular employment were working with no written job contract. Such trends indicate increased incidence of informality among regular women workers (Figure 3).

The PLFS 2018-19 figures show that 72% of all regular urban women workers were engaged in the service sector. Among these, the significant sectors of women’s engagement were education, domestic work, health and retailing activities, in that order (Figure 4, p 46). It is also seen that regular work is largely driven by the government where women are being increasingly engaged in large numbers as “scheme” workers. Therefore, the large numbers of anganwadi workers, anganwadi helpers, para-teachers, etc, are all counted as regular workers by the PLFS as they receive regular payments even though these are often even less than the minimum wage. The government itself calls them “honorary” workers and not employees. Added to this, are also workers, such as accredited social health activists (ASHAs), or *sakhis/mitras*, under various schemes where they are paid task-based incentives rather than regular salaries. While the government has been one major source of employment for women in the non-agriculture sectors, this has mainly been poor-quality employment either as front-line workers or

**Figure 4: Distribution of Urban Regular Women Workers across Tertiary Sectors, 2018–19**



Sources: PLFS 2018–19, NSSO 2020.

**Table 2: Women’s Wages as Percentage of Men’s Wages**

	Regular Workers		Casual Workers	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
1993–94	59.6	79.8	65.4	57.1
2011–12	62.5	77.9	69.2	60.8
2017–18	66.2	80.9	64.7	59.3
2018–19	64.4	77.3	64.9	63.2

Sources: “Employment and Unemployment in India,” NSSO, various years; PLFS 2017–18, NSSO 2019.

casual workers in public works (Sinha and Mitra 2020).

In terms of earnings and wage differentials, rigid wage gaps between the male and female workers have been observed since the early

1990s. While the “equal pay for equal work” act applies to only formal sector regular employment, especially in white-collar services, approximately 88% of total women’s employment is informal in India and therefore out of the purview of these legislations. Rigid occupational segregation by gender continues to drive the gender wage differences as is evident in Table 2. The labour market in India continues to be gendered with occupational segregation as well as wage differentials.

**Intersections between women’s unpaid work and labour markets:**

Several factors that inhibit women’s ability to engage in paid employment have been highlighted, both from the supply as well as demand sides. Emphasis has been placed on the issue of low skills among women restricting their ability to get more and better jobs (Mehrotra and Sinha 2019). Issues related to cultural barriers towards women engaging in paid work outside the household, safety and access to workplaces, and reduced supply of labour because of upward mobility of households are all factors that have been discussed (Dewan 2019; Mehrotra and Parida 2017; Rukmini 2019). Two important factors, especially from the policy perspective, are also the least discussed. One commonsensical explanation has emerged from the fact that improved educational outcomes for young women and girls would also require commensurate opportunities for them, the lack of which may discourage them from participating in low remunerated and low value-added activities. This is substantiated by both primary and secondary evidence on women regarding their aspirations and the kind of work they are looking for. The increasing unemployment rates among educated married women also alludes to this (Afridi et al 2018).

Second, an insidious yet important factor that receives less attention in the context of women’s labour force participation is the burden of women’s unpaid care work—managing the house, childcare, sick and elderly care. This is reflected also in the fact that work participation rates are lower among newly married women and especially women with young children. A recent field-based research by Deshpande and Kabeer (2019) in West Bengal in India clearly substantiates these arguments. At the household level, while women have internalised their role as primary caregivers, evidence from government surveys and other microstudies also suggest that more women want to work outside their premises if appropriate opportunities exist. The International Labour Organization (ILO)-Gallup report released on 8 March 2017 revealed that almost 30% of women in India who spend the majority of their time on domestic duties would like to engage in some kind of a job. The National Sample Survey data also clearly show that most women who are not in the labour market are engaged in household duties (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2020). In countries like India, it is known that due to the “discouraged worker effect” as well as high levels of poverty and informality, unemployment rates that emerge from survey data do not reflect the actual demand for work. In surveys where women have been expressly asked if they want to work, overwhelming numbers have responded positively.

Assessing the status of women’s work hence remains incomplete without looking at the non-market aspects of women’s work that remain largely invisible, unrecognised and unremunerated—but act as one of the major barriers for women to engage in productive activities. Statistics reveal that women worldwide spend disproportionately more time on unpaid care work than men. The recently concluded time use survey in India in 2019 clearly shows that men spend 222 minutes more on paid and productive work compared to women while women spend 300 minutes more on unpaid work than men (Table 3).<sup>1</sup>

**Table 3: Details of Work/Activities Performed by Women in India throughout the Day, Time Use Survey–2019**

ICATUS 2016 Code	Activity Description	Minutes Spent in a Normal Day by	
		Males	Females
1	Paid employment—production for others’ use	497	362
2	Production of goods and services for own use	214	127
3	Household chores—unpaid	102	339
4	Caregiving—unpaid	80	141

Source: Table (5), Minutes spent in a day on an average per participant of age six years and above in different three-digit/two-digit/one-digit activity code of TUS activity classification as a major activity (considering only the major activity of the time slots), Report on TUS in India 2019, NSSO, MoSPI, GOI.

In addition, while the 711 minutes of men’s work are well recognised and remunerated for, the 480 minutes of women’s work are not recognised as “work” and hence mostly does not get counted and also remains unremunerated. Also, the data clearly shows that a normal workday is almost two hours longer for women than men in a day when unpaid work is also accounted for.

Given this pattern of time use of women on a normal day, it is evident that the opportunity cost borne by women in order to fulfil the unpaid and care needs of the family is substantially

high. The non-recognition of the work and hence the time spent on such work contributes to women's work being undervalued and "invisibilised" to such an extent that official statistics show a large number of women as not working.

In the following section, we move on to assessing some of the major government programmes and policies for encouraging women's employment in this context.

### Critical Programmes for Women's Employment

Feminist economists in India for a long time have been pointing out that government programmes often suffer from a gender-neutral approach which is tantamount to gender blindness. It has often been argued that the macroeconomic framework that determines the government policies and designs for government programmes needs gender integration at its inception stages (Dewan 2019). Hence, selected government programmes that have a profuse impact on women's work and their status in the labour market, are discussed here, to highlight their inadequacy and the urgent need to address concerns of women workers.

Government policies and programmes for women's work have mostly been restricted to the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), programmes that revolve around women's self-employment and women's entrepreneurship facilitated through membership in self-help groups (SHGs) and providing wage work opportunities through the MGNREGA, 2005. There are also programmes related to skill development, and financial and digital inclusion. Evidently, policies pertaining to labour rights, including the recent labour codes do not recognise women as workers in their own rights and thus have played a role in "invisibilising" women's work to a large extent (Mazumdar and Neetha 2020). As a critical analysis of this remains outside the scope of this paper, we focus mainly on the programmes that have already included women to assess their adequacy. The MGNREGA, the only programme that provides reservations for women for wage employment, has a stated policy of equal pay for equal work and includes provisions to uphold the rights of women to access facilities such as crèches and toilets at the worksite.

**Programmes encouraging women's entrepreneurship:** The government's emphasis in the last few years has remained on encouraging women's entrepreneurship, mainly by extending credit facilities. The NRLM and its state chapters are integrating gender resource centres for empowering women, building leaders and entrepreneurs out of women. Designing skill development programmes (DDU-GKY PMKY), which also aim at building women's skills to access technology, facilitating access to digital platforms and promoting partnerships with start-ups aimed at providing women with fintech solutions, and facilitating access to credit through extending low-value MUDRA loans have been some of the main interventions. All these programmes primarily aim at making entrepreneurs out of women as a way to achieving greater workforce participation of women. While these measures have been pushed vigorously, the government's own data

does not show much impact of such programmes on improving the FLFPRs in the country.

The MUDRA scheme (or Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana [PMMY]), to encourage entrepreneurship, is expected to benefit women in particular as they constitute a major proportion of the beneficiaries of the scheme. The annual report of the PMMY 2018–19 clearly indicates that women borrowers constitute 41% of the total loans sanctioned in 2018–19. Further, under the Shishu category, the share of women was 65% in terms of number of accounts and 68% in terms of total loan amount in which the average loan size was only ₹27,640 in 2018–19 indicating the small magnitude of the loan amount accessed by women. The average size of the loan under PMMY in 2018–19 was ₹53,800 which was a marginal increase of around ₹1,000 compared to 2017–18. The cumulative figures for all four fiscal years beginning from 2015–16 show women constitute an overwhelming 70% of the total number of loans disbursed under the PMMY. Most of these loans were accessed by MFIs which had a large number of women beneficiaries and hence this large share of women.

**MGNREGA for wage employment:** The importance of focusing on increasing wage employment opportunities for women cannot be overstated. For unskilled women in rural areas, the MGNREGA has been an important source of non-agricultural employment. The act states that at least one-third of the employment created must be for women. The MGNREGA attracts a large number of women, with about 55% of total person-days of work created under this legislation accruing to women. There are a number of field reports to suggest that provision of equal wages for men and women, proximity of workplace, assumed safety at workplace and so on, makes MGNREGA a popular option for women. Barcia de Mattos and Dasgupta (2017) find that the MGNREGA has been instrumental in ensuring paid employment for women, and that for many married women, it is the first opportunity for paid work. They also find that paid employment and MGNREGA had positive and significant effects on women's control over household decisions. Overall, it has also been seen that the gender wage gap in MGNREGA is much lower (Dasgupta and Sudarshan 2011; Ghosh 2014).

The MGNREGA also recognises the other burdens on women. It includes a provision for ensuring creche facilities at worksites employing five or more women who have young children. However, based on the assessments so far, it has been seen that the implementation of this provision has been patchy and varies from state to state (FORCES-CWDS 2013).

**Women in public services:** The PLFS 2017–18 data show that 29% of women working outside agriculture in rural areas are engaged in public employment. Large numbers work as front-line workers, particularly in public health and education. Some cadres such as anganwadi workers and helpers, midday meal cooks, ASHA workers, and auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs) are exclusively women (these workers put together are estimated to be over 60 lakh women). Nearly half of the total

teaching workforce in elementary education in India are women. In recent times there has also been an increase of women employed as police constables in many states. But despite these opportunities, women remain concentrated at lower levels of the occupational hierarchy, restricted to “women’s roles” (traditionally caregiving occupations) and receive lower wages, poor working conditions (Sinha et al 2020). Public services is another potential area for women’s employment opportunities with decent conditions of work.

**Women’s unpaid work and government response:** Along with the direct initiatives to encourage women’s employment, based on the discussion above, it is clear that those that work towards reducing, recognising and redistributing women’s unpaid work burdens are also important. The existing government schemes and programmes covering for the provisions of better household infrastructure as well as facilities for childcare, that is, programmes that cater to provision for housing, piped water supply, toilets, electricity, access to clean fuel or LPG and so on as well as provision for childcare facilities in the form of National Crèche Scheme, Integrated Child Development Services; provisions to prevent violence against women and mitigating strategies for violence through provisions of helplines, shelter homes; providing access to healthcare and education facilities—would be included under these. While this paper does not go into details of each of these, it is necessary to state that these are also relevant for women’s employment and the critical analysis so far has shown the limited success of such programmes (Dewan 2019).

### Impact of COVID-19 on Women’s Work

Having set the context, the next sections briefly look at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant economic crisis on women’s status in the labour market. The precarity of women’s work in India in a pre-COVID-19 world plays an important role in understanding the fallout of the pandemic.

The worst affected have been those working in the informal sector, especially in urban centres and as seen above women workers are concentrated in informal sectors. A number of phone surveys as well as media reports show the severe loss in income faced by those in the informal sector and the poor, especially during the months of April and May 2020, when the country had the most severe lockdown. For instance, the COVID-19 Livelihoods Survey of nearly 5,000 self-employed, casual, and regular wage workers across 12 states of India, conducted between 13 April and 23 May 2020 by a team of researchers at Azim Premji University, found that almost two-thirds of respondents lost their jobs and those who could retain some form of employment during the lockdown saw their earnings drop by more than half. The urban migrant worker cohort was impacted relatively more than the rural counterparts (APU 2020).<sup>2</sup>

Other surveys such as the Indus Action survey conducted for over 10,000 respondents, IDinsights survey of 6,000 respondents across the poorest districts and the Dalberg survey of 47,000 respondents in rural and urban areas also show similar

findings, including increased food insecurity and hunger among households.<sup>3</sup> The data of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) which include a very large sample of households, with time-series panel data for many, also showed unprecedented levels of unemployment during the months of April and May. Later data from the CMIE show some recovery in employment; however, this momentum has also been reported to have slowed down since August 2020.

While few of the studies conducted so far have focused on the situation of women in particular, the available data show that women have been the worst affected in many ways. More women have lost their jobs or have faced a fall in their incomes during the period after the pandemic started. Women have stopped working for pay, though their contribution through unpaid labour has increased. Small businesses run by women experienced temporary and permanent closures. IWWAGE-LEAD study on home-based small business of women in handloom and handicrafts in India, conducted over November 2019 and August 2020—a pre- and post-COVID-19 comparative analysis—revealed income losses, substantial closure of businesses and withdrawal of women from such economic activities. It is further reported that the loss of micro and nano businesses owned by women have been greater than those owned by men.

Another important field report suggested that nearly two-thirds of India’s working women lost their jobs in April 2020. Women who had returned were less likely than men to return soon and look for alternate employment. The report also highlighted that factories in garments hubs such as in Tiruppur with around 4,00,000 women employees, were operating with 45% shortage in labour supply, especially of women who did not return to their work. This report also highlights some case studies of beauty parlour workers and domestic workers who returned to work with a substantial pay cut of more than 50%. Shiney Chakraborty (2020a) also reported similar income losses for women in most of the informal sectors. Further, reports suggest that a large section of women migrant workers remain unrecognised as “workers” since they do not have any form of registration or identity issued by authorities.

The ISSI telephonic survey of women informal workers in sectors like domestic work, construction, street vendors, waste pickers and home-based workers have clearly indicated that the gendered impact of COVID-19 is profound and women are impacted differently because of their prime responsibility as caregivers and owing to the lockdown, their unpaid care work had increased manifold. Of the respondents, 66% indicated an increase in unpaid work at home and 36% reported an increased burden of child and elderly care work during this period. These studies also reported that 83% of the respondents, mainly the construction workers, waste pickers and home-based workers, had witnessed substantial decline in their earnings (Chakraborty 2020b). Azeez et al’s (2020) paper explores the impact of COVID-19 on women migrant workers and their families, analysing qualitative interviews in two localities in Delhi and in Gurugram in Haryana. The paper

suggests loss of livelihood and resulting debt as the typical experience for women migrant workers. The complete closure of public transport facilities accompanied by mobility restrictions affected women workers relatively more.

Sinha and Mitra (2020) have argued that the state-induced “lockdowns” have not only severely impacted livelihoods but exacerbated vulnerabilities and worsened working conditions for women, especially those in informal sectors such as in agriculture and service occupations as front-line health workers, domestic workers, street vendors, beauticians, construction workers, beedi workers and so on. The ActionAid report based on a combination of in-person and telephonic survey of 11,000 respondents across 15 states, conducted in May 2020 corroborates these arguments.

While it is known that in times of economic distress, women's participation in the labour force increases, on the other hand, the employment available at such times tends to be in low value-added sectors with low payments and hazardous working conditions; with large numbers of male workers returning to rural areas, there is concern that even the few opportunities available for women, including in public works programmes, might shrink even further. For example, a related concern is that while the participation of women has on the whole been very high under the MGNREGA, with the restriction that 100 days of employment will be provided per household and inadequate expansion in the scheme post-COVID-19, the reverse migration of men in rural areas may lead to women being pushed out of worksites. Based on the website data on the MGNREGA, it can be seen that while women person-days generated as a proportion of total person-days was 54.6% in 2018–19 and 54.9% in 2019–20, in the current year, the achievement so far is 52.7%. This is slightly lower than the previous two years. While it may be too early to draw any conclusions, it does indicate that this is something to watch out for.<sup>4</sup> The previously mentioned ActionAid report also highlighted that fewer women were seeking work in the post-lockdown period as compared to men, indicating further exodus of women from the labour force.

This paints a grim picture of the conditions of women in the labour force in the current context. There remains a dire need for protecting those women who are in employment by ensuring that their incomes at least remain similar to pre-COVID-19 levels; create employment opportunities for those who have lost jobs and also create enablers for lessening women's burden of unpaid and care work by providing supportive infrastructure facilities within the households and at workplaces and ensuring nutrition and food security for the households to provide partial relief to women from the responsibilities of such work. The following section looks at the government's responses against this backdrop.

### COVID-19 Response: Gaps and Challenges

There have been very few specific interventions towards addressing issues of women's employment in the various announcements of the government as a response to the COVID-19-induced economic slowdown. This in itself is a major

shortcoming. The post-COVID-19 stimulus package focused majorly on easing credit availability for the micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). For example, the COVID-19 package announced by the Government of India includes a ₹50,000 crore equity infusion for MSMEs, almost ₹3,00,000 crore collateral-free loans for MSMEs and other businesses, and 2% interest subvention on MUDRA Sishu loans. However, it does not mention special provisions for women-owned microenterprises or the sectors that have a concentration of women's businesses.

Under the NRLM, as part of the response to COVID-19, women SHGs have been involved in making masks, protective gear, sanitisers and handwash. They have also been involved in running community kitchens and vegetable delivery units. It is reported by the ministry website that as on 20 November 2020, 2.8 lakh women have been involved in making almost 17 crore masks. Production and delivery of these kind of essential goods/services can be an effective way of also creating employment opportunities for women. However, it is not yet clear what the livelihood impact of these initiatives have been. The need for these items will only continue to increase given the spread of the pandemic. It would be useful to do a careful analysis of the costs and returns, as such small production units could not only contribute to the incomes of the women involved but also bring in money into rural areas, resulting in a multiplier effect.

While these efforts could make a positive contribution, as seen in sections above, self-employment only captures about one half of women's work. In the post-lockdown phase of economic slowdown and overall demand deficit, it is even more unlikely that these loan-based schemes to encourage women's entrepreneurship can actually make a dent on the problem of declining female labour force participation. Further, the emphasis of the announcements remains on easing loans and credit rather than providing access to markets, which becomes crucial in the post-lockdown scenario. It is not only the disruption in supply, but the slackening of overall demand within the economy that can potentially lead to closures of many such small businesses, especially for women, who are anyway perceived as “secondary earners” within a household. The increased burden of women's unpaid work due to the lockdown may also drive women to spend less time on businesses, which is also un conducive for the needs of the business.

In such a context, the importance of the MGNREGA is even more than before. Reports suggest that with increased demand for work, most of the allocations for the scheme have already been exhausted. With the additional concern of women being pushed out of the scheme, what is required at least as a temporary measure for this period of the economic crisis is to convert the entitlements under the MGNREGA into individual entitlements rather than at the household level. Therefore, under the scheme, each person should be provided at least 100 days of work, if there exists a demand. Further, care-related works, such as care of young children, and the elderly, sick and disabled must also be included under the MGNREGA.

Along with rural employment, given that the impact of the pandemic has been even more on urban areas, there needs to be schemes initiated for providing employment in urban locations as well. There are a number of proposals for an urban employment guarantee programme that been put forward with some state governments also initiating pilots. A gender-based analysis of these needs to be conducted taking into account the kinds of employment that women in urban areas are currently engaged in.

Along with these initiatives, the pandemic can also be seen as an opportunity to expand employment prospects for women in government programmes and departments. During the lockdown and after, it is mostly women workers who have been at the forefront of crucial activities, such as door-to-door campaigns, making masks, conducting surveys and contact tracing and so on. This is also a chance to recognise the contribution of women front-line workers by increasing their wages and regularising them. The current situation has amplified the importance of an agenda of universal provision of basic services, such as health, education and social protection, like never before. Expanding and strengthening public services can not only contribute towards improving India's human development indicators but also create millions of new jobs, more so for women. Some state governments have provisions such as reserving posts for women in government jobs. But such measures can have an impact only when there is an expansion in the total number of government jobs. Having said that, there is a need to hire more workers for public services, given the millions of vacancies that exist for these posts as per government norms (Sinha et al 2020). Given the current crisis, such initiatives need a bigger boost in terms of increased investments in the wake rising burden of household maintenance and care work of women.

Additionally, to address the increased burden of unpaid care work on women, social protection measures such as social security pensions, along with other interventions such as universal maternity entitlements and provision of childcare services also need to be strengthened and expanded. The Atmanirbhar India package did not include any announcement in this regard and nor did any other ministries announce increased investments on these elements.

Government responses to COVID-19 need to include measures to ensure that the contributions of women do not fall between the cracks. Women's invisible contribution to the economy in the form of unpaid work needs greater recognition and space in policies of the government, especially in the current context where women are struggling to take up paid work despite rising burdens of unpaid work, to make ends meet for their households.

## **Conclusions**

FLFPRS in India continue to be very low and also concentrated in low-quality and poor-paying jobs. A large number of women are self-employed, but a majority among them are working as unpaid helpers in household enterprises. While regular employment seems to be increasing, much of this is also in the government concentrated in the lower end of the occupational

ladder with few opportunities for upward mobility as well as poor quality of jobs. Wage employment opportunities for women, other than those as casual labour, remain elusive.

Any analysis of the situation of female labour force participation cannot be devoid of an understanding of the overall macroeconomic situation. The availability of employment opportunities depends much on how the economy is doing. Currently, the Indian economy is facing one of the largest contractions among the fastest growing economies and saving existing livelihoods while also creating new ones is a huge challenge. The pandemic-induced economic crisis has also exacerbated the problems for women across the country, especially those who want to work.

The previous discussion already highlighted the existing problems of adequate opportunities for women in a pre-COVID-19 world. The review of rapid surveys of labour conditions discussed earlier also validate the apprehensions of further aggravated situation for migrant and informal workers and workers in vulnerable occupations.

The response of the government has been weak and inadequate. Even before the pandemic, government programmes to address women's employment were focused largely on entrepreneurship and skill development, which, as pointed out, has its own limitations. Post-COVID-19 interventions have also been limited to similar policy announcements. Creating wage employment opportunities and addressing the unpaid work burdens of women have both been ignored, although the current situation points to the urgent need for both.

In terms of addressing the labour concerns of women in a COVID-19 context, it would be useful to identify sectors which have traditionally employed women and incentivise such sectors. Apart from casual wage work and regular public employment, women's wage work includes work undertaken in factories, especially in garments, electronics and food processing, which have served as traditional sectors of women's employment. While great emphasis has been on promoting "Make in India," and on "Atmanirbhar (self-reliant) India," the relief efforts announced remained elusive in terms of incentives for these sectors. Incentives in the form of subsidies, tax breaks, and government-sponsored employee protection programmes for these sectors assume more importance in the current context as most of these are export-oriented sectors.

Budget 2021–22 also proved to be dismal in terms of tackling the above issues. While the finance minister's speech in the Union Budget 2021–22 acknowledged the role of front-line workers in battling the pandemic throughout the past year and expressed gratitude for their efforts, the quantum of allocations to most important programmes for women reported in the Budget 2021–22 show a status quo or a decline, thus indicating declining expenditure commitments towards women's needs in an economy battling COVID-19 (Mitra and Chaudhry 2021).

What is required is an inclusive policy framework that enables government to invest substantially in productive sectors as well as spend more in social sectors in addition to infusing liquidity into the economy; keeping women and other marginalised at the centre of such policies.

## NOTES

- 1 The Time Use Survey 2019 comes with its own limitations. A major drawback has been its inability to capture women's care work in depth, thus underestimating women's time use on care.
- 2 Azim Premji University CLIPs Survey, 2020, <https://cse.azimpremjiversity.edu.in/covid19-analysis-of-impact-and-relief-measures/>.
- 3 Dalberg, Jan Sahas, IDinsights, Indus Action, and NCAER.
- 4 Detailed data here: [https://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/mgnrega\\_new/Nrega\\_StateReport.aspx?typeN=3](https://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/mgnrega_new/Nrega_StateReport.aspx?typeN=3).

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EXPANSION

## EPWRF India Time Series

(www.epwrfits.in)

## Cost of Cultivation of Principal Crops

Cost of Cultivation and Cost of Production data have been added to the Agricultural Statistics module of the *EPWRF India Time Series (ITS)* online database. This sub-module contains statewide, crop-wise data series as detailed below:

- Depending upon their importance to individual states, cost of cultivation and cost of production of principal crops of each state are given in terms of different cost categories classified as A1, A2, etc.
- Items of cost include operational costs such as physical materials (seed, fertiliser, manure, etc), human labour (family, attached and casual), animal and machine labour (hired and owned), irrigation charges, interest on working capital and miscellaneous, and fixed cost such as rental value, land revenue, etc, depreciation and interest on fixed capital.
- In addition, the following related data are given: value of main product and by-product (rupees/hectare), implicit rate (rupees/quintal), number of holdings and tseils used in the sample study, and derived yield (quintal/hectare).

The data series are available on annual basis from 1970–71.

*Agricultural Statistics module constitutes one out of 21 modules of EPWRF ITS covering a range of macro-economic, financial sector and social sector indicators for India.*

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