

COVID-19 and Informal Labour: A Study of Women Domestic Workers

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ABSTRACT

Women constitute 48.04 per cent of the total population of India as per the Census 2011. In India, private domestic work operates as an informal, unregulated sector with limited work opportunities for females upto a particular age. As per International Labour Organization (ILO), Domestic work refers to housework such as sweeping, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, cooking, caring of children and such other work which is carried out for an employer for remuneration. It provides an important livelihood source for illiterate women or those with very little education and is an increasingly common employment option for millions of poor women and girls – despite the low wages and employment insecurity. The present study has taken into account the impact of COVID-19 on the female domestic workers who work without any social and economic security. The primary respondents for the study were the female domestic helps working in the urban areas of Jammu district in J&K. The primary data has been supplemented with secondary sources including related reports, journals, and published articles. Legislative and administrative loopholes have also been taken into account and the policy suggestions have been put forward.

Keywords: COVID-19, Domestic Work, Informal Sector, Labour Force

Women constitute around 49.5 per cent of the total population of the world as per the recent estimates by the Population Division of United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.¹ Despite almost equal in number, gender inequality is a universal social, economic and political problem which has its root in the culture of the societies. Individual nations and international agencies have been continuously working towards addressing the problem of gender inequality for a long time. The United Nations has been working perpetually for the past five decades to ensure gender equality and rights to women. In 1945, the Charter of the United Nations became the first international agreement to affirm the principle of equality between women and men. The UN celebrated its first official International Women's Day on 8 March during International Women's Year in 1975.² The first UN women's conference, held in Mexico City in 1975, designated 1975–85 as the UN Decade for Women, and five months later the UN General Assembly launched that program. The second UN women's conference was held in Copenhagen in 1980, and the third UN women's conference was held in Nairobi in 1985. The participants at these

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meetings discussed issues such as pay equity, violence against women, landholding, and basic human rights.³ In 2015, The United Nations General Assembly adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. The SDG-5 calls for achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls with ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere as one of the several targets.⁴ India is a party to all the conferences and initiatives taken at the international level and is also working in the direction of ensuring gender equality in all the spheres of activity. The present research paper has focused on the economic inequality as one of the aspects of gender inequality which has increased in the times of COVID-19, with a special focus on women working as domestic helps in the urban areas of Jammu district in the Union Territory of J&K.

Domestic Work and Domestic Workers

As per International Labour Organization (ILO), Domestic work refers to housework such as sweeping, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, cooking, caring of children and such other work which is carried out for an employer for remuneration.⁵ Domestic workers comprise an important part of the global workforce in informal employment. They are among the most vulnerable groups of workers. They work for private households, often without clear terms of employment and excluded from the scope of labour legislation. A domestic worker may work on full-time or part-time basis; may be employed by a single household or by multiple employers; may be residing in the household of the employer (live-in worker) or may be living in his or her own residence (live-out). At present, domestic workers often face very low wages, excessively long hours, have no guaranteed weekly day of rest and at times are vulnerable to physical, mental and sexual abuse or restrictions on freedom of movement. Exploitation of domestic workers can partly be attributed to gaps in national labour and employment legislation, and often reflects discrimination along the lines of sex, race and caste.⁶

Informal Labour in India

Growing competition combined with increased market opportunities and limited resources have led to the emergence of an informal economy. The predominance of the informal sector has led to a situation of the benefits of economic growth being concentrated among few with a growing proportion of the population living as working poor (Srija & Shirke, 2014). Today the unorganized or the informal sector account for more than 90 per cent of the workforce in the country and almost 50 per cent of the national income evolves from this sector (National Statistical Commission, 2012). In India, women are almost always involved in some kind of productive and/or reproductive activity, but much of their work is invisible, and they are largely employed in low skilled, low paid informal work with little or no social security—for instance, as domestic workers or self-employed home-based workers (Chen, 2016; Raveendran, 2017). Women make for only 23% of those employed in India's informal sector, but up to 91% of Indian women in paid jobs are in the informal sector, according to the Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy-Institute of Social Studies Trust report.⁵ From street vendors and domestic workers to subsistence farmers and seasonal agriculture workers, women make up a disproportionate percentage of workers in the informal sector. Working in informal sector leaves women often without any protection of labour laws, social benefits such as pension, health insurance or paid sick leave. They continuously work for lower wages and in socially unsafe conditions, including risk of sexual harassment. The lack of social protection has long-term impact on women. COVID-19 pandemic is intensifying pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection. The immediate economic impact of the pandemic induced lockdown is already being felt by

informal workers. Women are likely to bear the brunt of job losses the most, given that the pre-lockdown significant and widening gender gaps in workforce participation rates, employment and wages were expected to intensify during the post-lockdown period (Chakraborty, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The present study has been conducted in the urban areas of Jammu district in the UT of J&K. The urban areas have been purposively chosen because in these areas the practice of hiring domestic helps is prevalent. This is due to the rise in income levels of the people, nuclearization of families as well as increased number of working females in formal jobs and businesses. The targets respondents for the study included female domestic workers working as household helps in the study area. The total number of respondents taken for the study is 25. Separate interviews were conducted with them both telephonically and personally. Their narratives are recorded and analyzed in order to arrive at general findings and conclusions.

Table 1 Number Respondent's Age Group and No. of Respondents

Respondent's Age Group (in years)	Number of Respondents
10-20	2
20-30	5
30-40	12
40-50	4
50-60	2
Total	25

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study was to understand the effects of COVID-19 induced lockdown on the socio-economic condition of domestic workers who have lost their jobs due to the newly adopted practice of maintaining social distancing in the pandemic times.

Situation in the Pandemic: A Grim Story

This once in a century pandemic situation has changed the nature of the social interactions altogether, perhaps, not permanently but atleast for a considerable period of time. It has confronted the mankind with never before circumstances and has affected every society in a negative way. It stopped social gatherings as well as the movement of people, even outside their houses. Millions lost their jobs and fell in the trap of poverty. Apart from other, the most affected group was of the people who were engaged in informal works without any social and economic security. Female domestic helps are one such category which is worst affected due the lockdown and the practice of social distancing.

Initially it was anticipated that the pandemic would be over soon and the situation would get back to normal but as the time passed, it has been realized that this pandemic is not going to end anytime soon and that people need to learn to live with this virus, perhaps for life. The first two waves of the pandemic exposed the health and economic insecurity in the country and the low-paid informal workers, especially the females, were the first to this burden. Domestic helps working on meager wages lost their jobs and were left with no other alternative work for earning livelihood. The narratives from the field substantiate this argument.

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One of the female workers who is separated from her husband and has four children to feed stated, (translated version)

“My husband left me ten years after marriage. I live in a rented accommodation of a single room. I barely manage to feed my children by working as a domestic help in three households. I have two daughters and two sons. During this health crisis, I lost all the three households as people were not ready to allow me to enter their homes. I have no other source of livelihood. This pandemic has made my children leave their education for earning livelihood for the family.”

Another woman narrated the following,

“We had migrated from village to city in search of work. My husband works as a peon in a private school and I work as a household help. We have two children who are teenagers. With the closure of schools due to the pandemic, my husband lost his job. I, too, was thrown out of my job because of health risks to the host family. We have no additional savings to feed our family. Government has provided us with free food but what about other liabilities and education of our children?”

These and other similar narratives have shown that these working women have faced a situation of distress in these tough times with no alternatives at their disposal. No doubt the things are improving day by day and some of them have resumed their work but the anticipation of a third wave of COVID-19 has made them worrisome and susceptible to another spell of distress and anxiety. This has been exacerbated by no social security measures for these workers. Even the legislations enacted by the government from time to time are not able to address the issues of these workers who are actually contributing to the GDP of the country.

The Code on Social Security was passed by the Parliament in September 2020. Under this Code, social security is defined as the measures of protection afforded to employees, unorganized workers, gig workers and platform workers to ensure access to health care and to provide income security, particularly in cases of old age, unemployment, sickness, invalidity, work injury, maternity or loss of a breadwinner through schemes framed under the code (Bardoloi et al, 2020). The Code, much like the erstwhile Unorganized Workers Social Security Act, stipulates the formation of national and state-level Social Security Boards to recommend schemes for unorganized workers. However, the Code on Social Security does not specifically address the immediate issues of domestic workers who suffered due to the ongoing pandemic. Similarly, no specific schemes have ever been introduced for female domestic helps.

A migrant female worker who is in her late 50s stated,

“I am a widow. My children have abandoned me. After the death of my husband, I started working as a domestic help to sustain myself. I have been doing this for more than past 15 years now. During the lockdown, I lost my job. Although I am getting widow pension but it is merely 1000 rupees a month. It is very difficult for me to manage due to my deteriorating health. I don't know how I will survive in future.”

On the basis of multiple responses from the field it is worth noting that female helps are found across different age groups. The main reasons for them to work are poverty, lack of family support, and husband's death or separation due to multiple reasons. However, some are working to support their husband and creating an additional source of income for the family.

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But one cannot ignore the fact that these workers are working in informal sector with temporary jobs which are highly insecure and guarantee no regular source of income. Pandemic has not only complicated the situation for these workers but has also brought to limelight the loopholes in the policy framework of our country and the callous attitude of our administration regarding the condition of these temporary workers. These lacunae need to be addressed so that the dignity of the female workers in informal sector in general and the female domestic helps in particular get due place and importance in the legislative and administrative process of the country.

CONCLUSION

Many have lost their jobs, many have migrated back to their home lands, and many have lost their lives during this deadly pandemic. Socio-economic security is something that a welfare state must provide to all its citizens no matter what happens. As soon as the pandemic gets over, it becomes imperative for the government to frame such a system where every person, and especially the women, gets socio-economic security irrespective of social background. It must be acknowledged that domestic work is also an economic activity which requires due weightage while calculating the Gross Domestic Product of a nation. Until and unless this fact is not acknowledged, it is highly impossible that the government policies and legislations will give due weightage to the household workers. For India to achieve the desired SDG-5 and ensure gender equality, it is imperative to take into consideration every women worker, whether working in organized or unorganized sector with sheer commitment.

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End Notes

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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