



WOMEN, WORK AND LIVELIHOODS DURING COVID-19

Research Brief

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Women, Work and Livelihoods during COVID-19

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), with support from the Ford Foundation, undertook a research study, ***Vikalp: An Exploratory Study on Non-Traditional Livelihoods***, to unpack enablers and barriers to women's work. The study examined and expanded the idea of "traditional" and "non-traditional" livelihoods for women. We found that the world of work for women is not organized in the binary of traditional and non-traditional livelihoods, but is much more complex.

Occupations/sectors where women have conventionally been present are considered traditional, while occupations/sectors where women have largely been absent are considered non-traditional. Both these realms are defined by a web of gender norms, market dynamics, policy gaps, and lack of political agenda setting for inclusion of women in the workforce. In our study, we decoded some underlying issues and solution areas while identifying enablers and barriers for women to enter non-traditional jobs and sectors.

The inquiry into these **enablers and barriers** was based on the premise that the distribution of women's workforce in India is gendered and lopsided across different sectors. Nearly 79 percent of Indian women are employed in low or underpaid, low productivity work (Sinha, 2019). Further, the roles

that women workers occupy are entrenched in the gendered division of labor, wherein women's paid work is inextricably tied with unpaid reproductive and care work.

PRECARITY OF WOMEN'S WORK

Although the study was focused on unpacking the significance women-concentrated sectors hold for women through their own narratives, it took a deeper dive into the longstanding trends of women's participation in the workforce. It is widely acknowledged that women's workforce participation has been low and steadily declining. Poor conditions of employment — such as work in low productivity sectors (manufacturing, home-based employment, among others), low share in salaried jobs as opposed to male counterparts, lack of or unfulfillment of maternity leave benefits and pension schemes, etc. — further add to the low participation of women in the workforce (IWWAGE, 2020).

Thus, the binary of women-concentrated and women non-concentrated sectors is not a sufficient criterion to understand the complex landscape that impedes a vast majority of women from engaging in productive paid employment. This was highlighted by several labor surveys conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic

(Agrawal & Ashraf, 2020; Lahoti et al., 2020; Sapkal et al., 2020). The impact on workers is greater owing to the conditions of work such as informal work, lack of social security, no written contract of legal recourse and use of public spaces as workplaces for a large percentage of the informal workforce. The exacerbated impact on women is on account of loss of work and autonomy associated to the income and precariousness of finding work again due to the increase in household and care work.

The Vikalp study proposes a gender-transformative framework (please refer to Figure 1) to enable further understanding of work to achieve a gender-transformative potential in women's lives. It encapsulates newer perspectives on the lives of women who aspire to work and are already working emerging from the study.

The analytical framework was informed by ICRW's earlier research on understanding and measuring women's economic empowerment (Golla et al., 2018), which recommends interrogating underlying factors that shape norms and institutions to unpack the nature of women's participation in an economy. The research explored narratives of women in various occupational roles across sectors. We also explored the influence of norms within the household, the market and by the state on the lives of these women.

This brief seeks to apply the gender-transformative framework of work highlighted in the study to prevailing conditions of work and employment for women workers during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN'S WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION

1. Situation of women workers since the lockdown:

The recent survey conducted with self-employed, casual and regular wage workers across 12 Indian states (Lahoti et al., 2020) highlights the impact of COVID-19 on women workers. Around 52 percent of respondents were women workers. Overall, 67 percent workers lost their employment and women workers were at a higher risk of food insecurity as compared to men. Another survey by ActionAid (2020) highlighted that the loss of employment was gendered with more women

reporting loss of work as compared to men. The survey also highlighted that about 90 per cent of women with paid employment are in the informal sector, often in jobs which are undervalued and underpaid. The survey further identified that 52 percent women workers lost wages due to non-payment in the initial phases of the lockdown in India (mid-March–May 2020), which led to a loss in savings at the household level. This coupled with watering down of labor rights with new amendments to labor codes (Magazine, 2020) implies flexibility in favor of the employers and a greater demand for contractual labor (Das, Deb Kusum, Choudhury & Singh, 2015; Magazine, 2020) leaving women workers more vulnerable.

So far, only civil society organizations, academics and experts are gathering data and evidence on loss of employment and livelihoods — in the absence of any state effort, directly or indirectly, to conduct a nationwide survey to inform planning as the economy opens up.

2. State response to COVID-19 and its implication on women workers:

The state's imperceptive response to the impact of COVID-19 on employment and the economy has exacerbated existing issues faced by women workers. Women employed in jobs with low pay and productivity lost their livelihoods. Their condition worsened on account of barriers to enrolment and poor access to state welfare schemes (Dutta et al., 2020). State packages, such as *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package* or *Pradhan Mantri Kisan Yojana*, have been insufficient because of low number of enrolled beneficiaries (Amnesty International, 2020). Several other women workers ended up in jobs fraught with high health risks.

Healthcare is one of the sectors where participation of women has been rising. Overall, women as nurses and community health workers significantly outnumber doctors. Their service has been integral to the public health system and was listed by the state as one of the essential services during the lockdown and after. The failure of policy in addressing physical safety and health risks for women health workers is a clear demonstration of the state's gender blind policies compounded with a lack of concern for the most distressed in the economy, many of whom are

women. These conditions forced frontline health worker unions — accredited social health activists (ASHAs) and Anganwadi workers— to go on a nation-wide two-day strike in August amidst the pandemic (Bhardwaj, 2020).

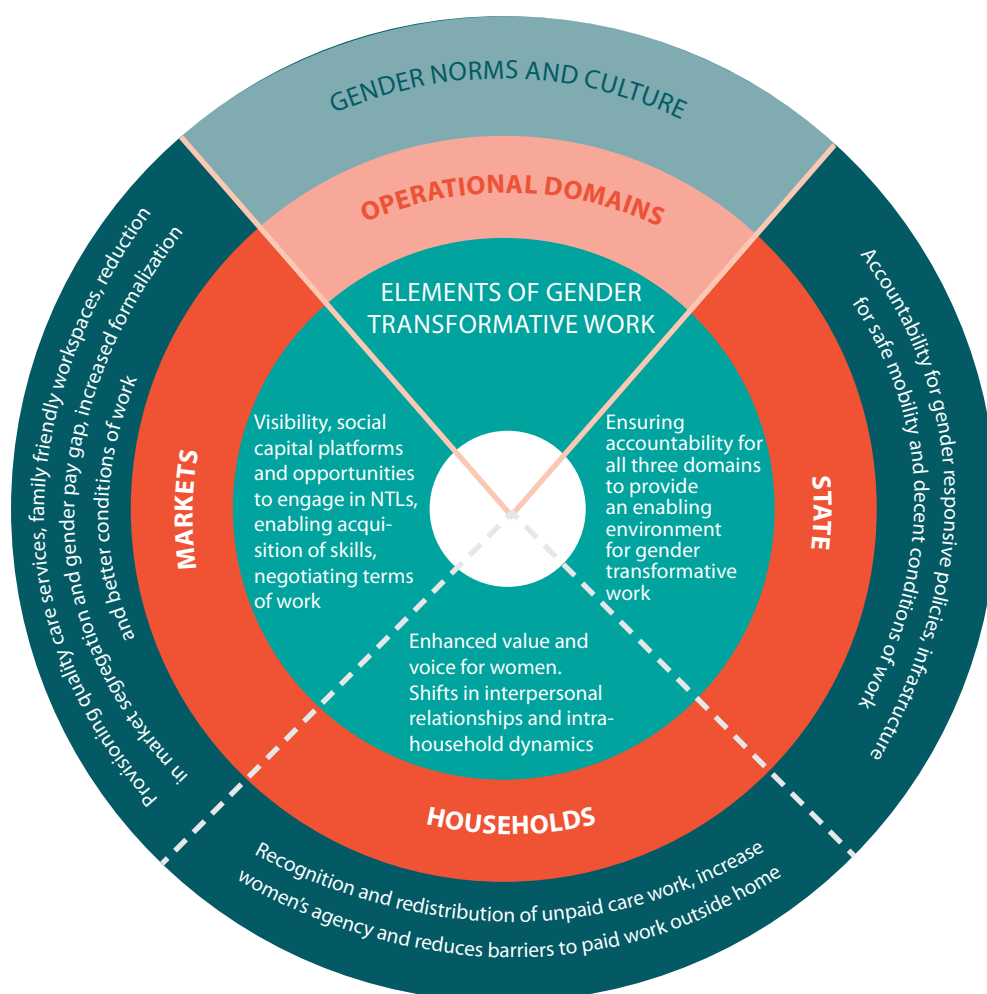
Irrespective of the working status of women, the lockdown led to shrinkage of public spaces (also workplaces for many informal workers) and movement outside the household, increased women's unpaid work and reinforced their socio-historic role of a caregiver. The Vikalp study took note of women's constant and simultaneous juggling and negotiation of household chores, unpaid care work and paid work. The lockdown as a public health response, did not factor in differential outcomes, which led to inadequate

prevention and redressal mechanisms to curb the rise in domestic violence (Anand & Nanda, 2020). The Vikalp policy report (Pal et al., 2020) argued that there are several policies which have been drafted with the intention to bring about a social change, but have not been formalized or, in some cases, lack political will and effective implementation due to inadequate budget or non-convergence of support from different government departments.

The intersecting and overlapping social organization model, of household, market and state, is a reference point for highlighting some of the aforementioned concerns, and the following section weaves these experiences of COVID-19 with elements of the proposed gender transformative framework, which emerged from the Vikalp study.

GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR WORK & EMPLOYMENT

Figure 1: A Framework for Gender Transformative Work



The framework notes that it is reductive to focus on just the economic value of work. It urges researchers, policymakers, program implementers to consider a comprehensive lens that takes into account women's location — in the household, the market, and the state— and its interlinkages. This would enable us to achieve the aims of gender-transformative work, which challenge the existing nexus of gender status quo in all these domains.

COVID-19 is likely to accelerate the decline of women's workforce participation and their working terms and conditions are likely to deteriorate further. In order to minimize this, key elements identified in the three domains of the framework — **value, visibility, and accountability of duty bearers** — could be a starting point.

The **value of women's voices** needs to be included substantively into research and surveys to generate evidence on loss of employment and livelihoods, in designing programs, crises mitigation plans and relief and rehabilitation efforts. This will meaningfully contribute to the understanding of women's work and the associated barriers, within and outside the household.

Visibility of women's work in different forms and shades is dependent on conditions of work allowing women to negotiate, assert and demand decision-making on important matters concerning their lives. As millionsⁱ (Gupta, 2020) of migrant workers walked away from urban centers during the lockdown between March-May 2020, the visibility and accounting for women workers as a category was subsumed within the homogenous groups of families of migrants or as part of the jodi systemⁱⁱ in sectors such as construction, at brick kilns, etc. In response to COVID-19, women working as community health workers and in self-help groups under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)ⁱⁱⁱ (Yadav, 2020) are building support groups and networks in communities, all efforts that should be documented.

Accountability for reducing structural barriers for women to work needs to shift away from women and focus on "duty-bearers" within households, state, and market. This may manifest itself as support in household negotiations by public provisioning of unpaid care work (crèche, community kitchen, community center as safe space etc.), ensuring better conditions of work as an employer, or promoting gender-transformative policy design by the state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are applicable, in general, for improved policies, conditions and terms for women's work. These stand emphasized in light of the COVID-19 pandemic that has further marginalized women.

- 1. Recognizing the exacerbation of gender inequality due to COVID-19:** Any policy, implementation program or research on women's work must take into account the disproportionate representation of women in the workforce. Unequal pay, informal work and lack of benefits are typical representations of how gendered roles manifest inside the household. This dictates not only what work is available for women, but also the means available to access this work, including accessing education, skilling, financial resources, mobility, ability to exercise choice and negotiate marriage, and childbearing. In the context of COVID-19, there is evidence of a general reinforcement of harmful gender norms (Harper, 2020) which has serious implications to consider for policymakers and development practitioners.
- 2. Addressing gender-blind economic and policy responses:** The economic recovery of women's work needs to be a concerted effort on different fronts. There is a need for universalization and higher investment in public welfare, from food security to public services such as water connections, safer public spaces and transport, and creches that can reduce the burden of unpaid work. At the same time, labor laws cannot be weakened (Sundar,

2020) further for reviving the economy. The World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Gap Index, which uses pre-pandemic data, ranks India 112th (of 153 countries) in offering equal opportunities to women and men (Lal, 2020). This is telling of India's gender-blind policies that prevent women from accessing markets and resources to participate in economic life, as seen during the pandemic.

- 3. Mitigating increased violence in the context of crisis:** Increased sexual and gender-based violence was reported during the lockdown months and mobility remains restricted due to COVID-19 at present (Amnesty International, 2020). For many women, job losses meant continued confinement at home, increasing their burden of unpaid care work, and risk for physical and emotional violence. As many frontline health workers and members of self-help groups are women, who have been at the forefront provisioning critical health services and information, they have also been targets of public fear during the pandemic (ICRW, forthcoming). Overall, COVID-19 policy response has not considered the vulnerability of women to violence (Fan, 2020), which is reflective of existing unequal gender norms. This calls for directed public service messaging from the state, provision of violence redressal helplines and treating gender-based violence as a core part of public health response during crises.

NOTES

ⁱ Conservative estimates by research scholars put the number of migrant workers affected by the lockdown to be anywhere between 20 million and 22 million (Gupta, 2020)

ⁱⁱ The *jodi* system refers to a recruitment process, whereby "millions of migrant workers are recruited in pairs (*jodis*) or as a family unit by contractors for brick making near and at kilns..." (CWDS, 2012)

ⁱⁱⁱ The NRLM aims at reducing rural poverty by enabling poor households to access gainful self-employment and skilled wage employment opportunities. NRLM intends to mobilize 10-12 crore rural households through self-help groups in a time-bound manner by 2024-25. The mission has been designed to bring about a sustainable improvement in the livelihoods of the poor by building strong community institutions. (Aajeevika, 2020)

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