

Impact Of COVID-19 On Female Domestic Workers

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic and India's sudden nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020 disproportionately affected India's informal sector, particularly female domestic workers who faced job loss, income reduction, and limited access to healthcare and state support. This paper draws on telephonic interviews with five female domestic workers selected through purposive sampling during the pandemic. The interviews explored changes in employment, household dynamics, access to healthcare, and state support. Transcripts were manually analysed to identify major themes. Findings show sharp income reduction for most workers, with only one respondent retaining all employers due to long-standing social ties. A newcomer to domestic work accepted extremely low wages due to distress, reflecting weak bargaining power. Despite reporting symptoms, respondents avoided COVID-19 testing due to stigma and fear of job loss. Vaccination access depended largely on assistance from employers or family. All respondents availed free ration kits, but only one accessed financial aid due to lack of Jan Dhan accounts or awareness. Household tensions intensified, with some women becoming sole earners and facing increased financial pressure. The pandemic deepened vulnerabilities among female domestic workers but also highlighted their crucial role in sustaining households. Strengthening social protection, healthcare access, and financial support is essential for crisis resilience.

Keyword: COVID-19, Domestic workers, Informal sector, Gender, Livelihood insecurity, India, Social protection

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I. Introduction

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden announcement of a nationwide lockdown on 24th March 2020, millions of people lost their jobs. It is said to be the most severe crisis since the Second World War (International Labour Organization, 2020). Those worst hit by this were the ones working in the informal sector.

In a situation with no source of livelihood, job security, or institutional support, most of them from the unorganized sector felt strangled. One such group of helpless laborers is the domestic workers. Official data states that 4.2 million people are employed as domestic workers in India, out of which 75% are women (Sumalatha et al. 2021). Out of fear of getting infected, many households let go of their domestic workers and in cases where they were able to retain their jobs, they had to risk contracting the virus or work overtime for low or reduced wages. Coupled with this, many of them are unable to access basic healthcare facilities and state support.

My paper focuses on the plight of female domestic workers who, in most cases, are sole earners in their families. This is an attempt to understand not just the economic impact that the pandemic had on them but also to shed light on their family dynamics, access to health care and state support.

II. Literature Review

Understanding the Informal Economy

The term 'informal sector' originated for the first time in the anthropological works of Keith Hart in the early 1970s. This was a term he used to refer to the economic activities of migrants from North Ghana in the capital city Accra (Chen and Carre 2020, 1). Great rural-urban migration marked the post-independence period in India however, only a minuscule proportion of the population was able to get jobs in the formal sectors. The majority population had to find jobs within the 'informal sector' with no security, stable source of income or benefits. India's informal sector includes an array of traditional and modern economic activities. **"They are engaged in most branches of industry, including traditional artisan and craft production; street vending and market trading; construction and transport; manufacturing, including industrial outwork; personal and information technology services; and work intermediated by digital platforms"** (Ibid). Studies have stated that the magnitude of these 'footloose workers' ranges from 50 million to more than double that number and they account for one-fourth of the rural workforce in India (Bremas 2020). According to ILO reports, 81% of employed

persons in India are engaged in the informal sector. (Nearly 81% of the Employed in India Are in the Informal Sector: ILO, 2018)

Talking about the informal sector employed in Industrial labour, Jan Breman states that-

“The practice of instant hire-and-fire indicates that workers are not protected by legal regulations. Such rules do exist but, due to the state’s lack of will to exercise effective control over their enforcement, they are circumvented by employers with ease...There is no regulation of work conditions: of wage levels, modes of payment, working hours, vacations, or social welfare provisions. Nor are there directives to protect workers’ health during the production process. The unprotected nature of informal sector labour is closely linked with the inability of the workforce in this sector to protect itself by organising” (Breman 1999, 411)

Gender Disparity in Informal Sector

In India, women are mostly engaged in some kind of productive and/or reproductive activity, but their work is usually considered invisible due to various definitional limitations. (Chakraborty, 2021). Along with this, they are ***“excluded and erased from the sphere of worker rights”*** (Chen & Carre 2020, 8). Reports have shown that women’s participation in the informal sector is far greater than the formal sector and in many rural households, women are engaged in the labour force. However, this does not imply the balance of power within the household is more equal (Breman, 1999). Most times, even if women contribute the same amount of labour hours as their husbands, they are paid much less or none at all. In most cases, they have to combine unpaid family labour with informal work (Borah, 2019). As stated as an example in class, women wash, iron, repair and make clothes ready for sale in thrift markets like Sarojini Nagar of New Delhi, while their husbands sell these clothes in the market. However, women are not remunerated for their contributions (Sujatha, 2021).

It was noted that even within the same sector, wage disparities persist because of the gendered division of tasks. ***“Female domestic workers tend to be concentrated in cleaning and care services, whereas male domestic workers engage in better paid jobs in private households as gardeners, drivers or security guards”*** (Chakraborty 2021, 6). Along with gender inequality, when structural differences of caste and class also play a role in the employment situation of women, their condition becomes even dire. To address this issue and to build sisterhood amongst women informal workers of all castes, classes, trades and tribes, Ela Bhatt started her initiative called Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) of India which has now over 1.5 million women members. (Bhatt, 2006)

The subjects of this study are domestic workers in India. Official data records 4.2 million people employed as domestic workers whereas the number rises up to 50 million in unofficial estimated and out of them, 75% are women (Sumalatha, Bhat, & Chitra, 2021). Summarising from various studies, it is noted that ***“low wages and lack of legal protection, unpaid overtime and occupational health problems, poor bargaining power, working without leave under coercion, child care issues and health ailments such as back pain and skin allergy, physical and sexual violence, exploitative working conditions and human right violations, absence of a formal organisational framework for domestic workers, lack of representation of domestic workers in associations, exclusion of domestic workers from legal rights for minimum wages were found to be issues affecting social justice of women domestic workers in various studies. In the context of India, caste, religion and gender dimensions also play a major role in determining the features of domestic work as well as nature of exploitation which also influences the bargaining power of the domestic workers”*** (Ibid, 2)

COVID-19 and its impact on female domestic workers

As noted above, gendered division of tasks even within the same sector existed before the pandemic however with the imposition of a sudden lockdown on 24 March 2020, women had more to lose in comparison to men. Studies have stated that the pandemic worsened their situation “by increasing women’s burden of domestic chores, unduly cuts and lay-offs in employment” (Chakraborty, 2020). Analysing the data by the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy, Bina Agarwal notes that in April 2020, even though more men lost their jobs as compared to women, yet women “were 20 percentage points less likely to be employed among those employed before the pandemic” (Agarwal, 2021).

In a study conducted with 260 domestic workers from Delhi, Mumbai and Kochi, it was found that 45% lost their jobs during March-June 2020 (Sumalatha, et al. 2021). Once work resumed in the period of August-September 2020, only 80% were employed while 20% were jobless (Ibid). The common reasons given for termination of services were worker’s fear for their health, inability to maintain social distancing at workplace and stigma towards domestic workers (Ibid). However, based on an analysis of the Institute of Social Studies Trust Report, when we draw an analogy of the impact that Covid-19 had on female domestic workers and women in other forms of the informal sector (street vendor, waste picker, home-based worker, construction worker), we notice that the former were less economically affected as compared to the latter group of workers. (Chakraborty, Impact of Covid-19 National Lockdown on Women Informal Workers in Delhi, 2020)

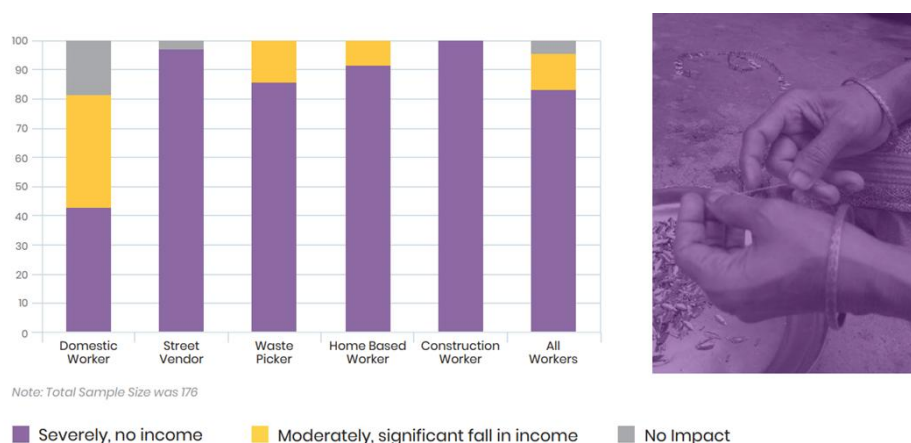


Figure 1: Impact on Income/Earnings

The pandemic had various forms of immediate impacts on the families of domestic workers like inability to afford rent, restriction in food intake, no diversification in food basket and increase in debts. The long term impacts included job insecurity, depletion in savings, increased financial insecurity and stress in marital relationship. (Sumalatha et al. 2021)

Coping mechanisms during Covid-19

The impact of Covid-19 was not only felt in the economic arena but also affected women's access to public infrastructure and basic essential items like food and medicines. The central government announced the provision of food grains to beneficiaries under the Public Distribution System however majority of them were unable to avail the PDS scheme. (Chakraborty, Impact of Covid-19 National Lockdown on Women Informal Workers in Delhi, 2020). Out of those who could avail it, many of them complained of having to stand in long queues and at times going back home empty-handed as the shops ran out of supplies (Ibid).

The central government also announced relief packages during this period of crisis under the Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojna (PMJDY) which assured a sum of Rs. 500 to eligible women per month. However, studies revealed that most of them were unable to access these schemes either because they did not have the special PMJDY bank account required for the cash transfer (Agarwal, 2021).

In order to make ends meet during this financial crisis, families were forced to sell small assets like jewellery while holding on to livestock and land till the very end. In most cases the smaller assets belong to the women while the immovable and larger assets are owned by men. Agarwal notes "when women lose their assets while men retain theirs, women's bargaining power within the home is undermined, leaving them more vulnerable" (Agarwal 2021, 246). Moreover, it was noted that male unemployment led to an escalation in cases of domestic violence in India. (Ibid).

III. Methodology

The selection of the 5 female domestic workers for this study was done through purposive sampling method. The data was collected through telephonic interviews wherein the questions focused on their working conditions before and during pandemic, their access to health care facilities, state support and their family dynamic during the time of crisis. The interviews were transcribed and manually analyzed to understand how various spheres of their lives were impacted in the current situation.

IV. Analysis

Table 1: General profile of the respondents

Respondent	Age	No. of members in household	Period of employment as domestic worker	Migration status (Yes/No)	Native place
Seema	52 years	5	25 years	Yes	West Bengal
Taposi	37 years	3	15 years	Yes	Malda, West Bengal
Madhuri	32 years	3	10-12 years	Yes	Malda, West Bengal
Naseema	24 years	3	1 month	Yes	Bihar
Neelu	35 years	2	Few months	Yes	Malda, West Bengal

Table 2: Impact of Covid-19 on working conditions

Respondent	No. of houses they worked for before pandemic	No. of houses they currently work for	Monthly income before pandemic	Current income
Seema	5	5	Rs. 8000	Rs. 8000
Taposi	6	3	Rs. 10,000	Rs. 6000
Madhuri	5	3	Rs. 12,000	Rs. 9000
Naseema	0	1	-	Rs. 1500
Neelu	0 (owned a biryani cart pre- pandemic)	2	Rs. 15,000	Rs. 12,000

Impact on their working conditions

Table 1 shows the general profile of all my respondents while table 2 shows how COVID-19 impacted their employment.

3 interesting trends were noted here. In the first case we see that post lockdown, 3 out of 5 domestic workers faced a severe reduction in their monthly income and they were not called back for work. Contrary to this, in the second case, Seema stated that all of her previous employers called her back for work once the lockdown was lifted and hence, she did not face any reduction in her salary. Not only that, she also mentioned that her employers paid her for the months that she did not come for work due to the lockdown. They called and enquired about her well-being as well. When we look at the years of working experience that each of the domestic workers have, we notice that Seema has worked for over 5 years in each of the houses that she is currently employed in. This was not so in the cases of other domestic workers who have only been employed for a period ranging from few months to a year. The bond that Seema has with her employers played a huge role in them immediately calling her back for work and even paying her for the period she was not working for them. This shows how certain *“economic actions are embedded in structures of social relations”* (Granovetter 1985, 481).

In the case of Naseema we see yet another change. Up until March 2020, she had been financially dependent on her husband and mother but because of the lockdown her husband lost his job. In a period of utter distress, Naseema decided to look for jobs and has been employed as a domestic worker in one house for about 3 months. When we compare her monthly salary with others in the same occupation, we notice that she is the lowest paid domestic worker. This has to do with the fact that unlike other domestic workers who have been employed for years, Naseema, in a moment of absolute distress, was not in a bargaining position and had to settle for whatever she could find. This is yet another example of the distress driven nature of women’s employment (Borah, 2019). Most of them in dire circumstances take up casual jobs with low wages and are vulnerable to exploitation and human rights violation. (Bhatt, 2006)

Access to health care and state support

A rather surprising finding during my interview was that when I asked the respondents if they or anyone in their family was infected by the virus, they all responded no. But in my interaction with 2 of their employers, I was told that their domestic helpers (Taposi and Neelu) were absent for a 4-5 days when the second wave of COVID-19 was at its peak. When asked for the reason of their absence they reported having high fever and body pain. It is also interesting to note that they did not get a COVID test done even when requested by their employers. My analysis is that the stigma associated with the virus might have stopped them from getting a test done. As Jan Breman notes, *“in a civilization haunted by the purity–pollution syndrome, the virus amplifies the stigma of impurity in which substantial segments of the population are forced to work and live. Social distancing fits well with a customary code of segregation.”* (Breman, The Pandemic in India and Its Impact on Footloose Labour, 2020). Along with this the fear of losing their job if faced with a covid positive report might have influenced their decision to not get a test.

When enquired about their vaccination status, 3 respondents said that they have been partially vaccinated, 1 respondent was fully vaccinated while 1 respondent was not vaccinated at all (Fig 2). The 4 respondents who got their first and second doses were assisted in the registration process, either by their own family members or their employers, which made the procedure easy for them. In the case of Naseema, who had not been employed anywhere for the longest time, could not get any assistance in registration process, which is why she could not get the vaccination so far. This shows that the idea of ‘*atmanirbharta*’ or ‘self reliance’ which our government proudly promoted as a key to getting over this tumultuous period was not really feasible at the ground level especially in the cases of working classes.

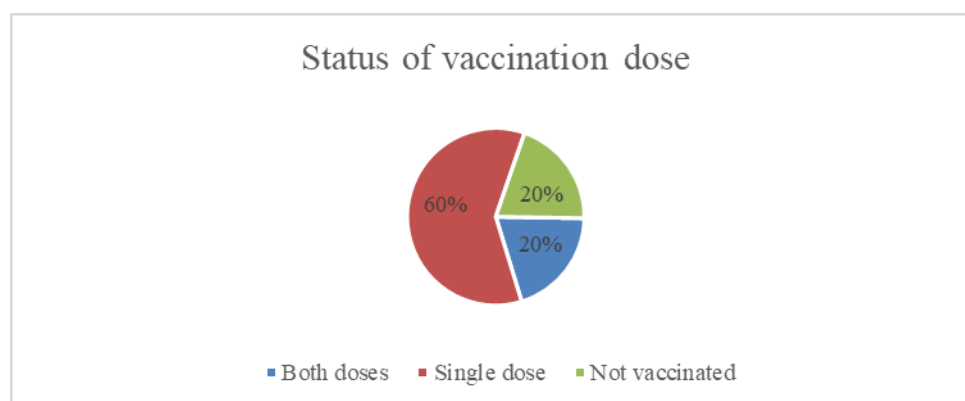


Figure 2: Vaccination dose status

When enquired about state support in terms of accessing free ration supply/ food kit and financial aid by the government, it was noted that while the former was availed by all, only one respondent could avail the benefits of government financial aid (Table 3). It was observed that some of them did not know or even enquire about the financial aid provided by the central government under the PMJDY. When asked, only Madhuri said that the reason she did not get the one-time transfer of Rs. 500 is because she did not have a Jan Dhan account necessary for the transfer.

Table 3: Availing State support

Respondent	State Support	
	Free ration/ food kit	Financial aid
Seema	Yes	No
Taposi	Yes	Yes
Madhuri	Yes	No
Naseema	Yes	No
Neelu	Yes	No

Impact on their household dynamic

Various studies have highlighted the disturbed family environment and increased conflicts at home that Covid-19 has brought with it (Agarwal, 2021). My analysis was no different. It was seen that the existing tensions within the family escalated during this period of crisis which left many women to be the sole earners in their family. Naseema recounted a particular incident with her husband- *“there were more fights because everyone was worried. My husband left me during the pandemic. I had to take care of my children alone....He also beats me...One time I got him locked up in the jail. Then my mother tried to convince me to take back the complaint. My husband kept calling me from the policeman’s phone and said he won’t hit me again. I withdrew the complaint but he still beats me”*.

2 out of 5 respondents said that their husband does not stay with them. Remaining 3 respondents stated that their husbands are engaged in daily wage labour which was heavily affected by the sudden lockdown and COVID-19 related layoff. This increased the pressure on women who were already burdened with their own household duties and are now having to work extra to manage family expenses. Some respondents said they exhausted their savings and some had to borrow money from friends and family members. More than fear of contracting the virus, most of the respondents were worried about how to afford rent for the coming months.

V. Conclusion

When I analyze the existing literature on the impact of COVID-19 on informal sector workers and compare it with my observations, I come to the conclusion that not everyone within the informal sector was affected the same way. While more men lost their jobs in absolute numbers, more women, especially those employed as domestic workers, had to bear the brunt of this crisis period. Owing to the sexual division of labour within the household and their role as reserve army of cheap labour, which is pushed into the labour market in periods of crisis, women had to endure the dual burden of managing the household chores and ensuring a stable source of income. However, it also becomes necessary to note here that because these women had a relatively more regular source of income, they were able to run the household. None of the respondents were forced to go back to their native places during the pandemic but, as other studies reveal, this was not the case in majority of the people employed in other forms of informal labour (construction workers, street vendors, waste pickers etc.).

(Breman, The Pandemic in India and Its Impact on Footloose Labour, 2020) Perhaps this is another reason why my study did not reveal many cases of domestic violence because my respondents were not financially dependent on their husbands and they mostly lived in their own house. Studies have highlighted that those women who own house or land are at a lower risk of intimate partner violence than women with no secure job or property of their own (Agarwal, 2021).

In these turbulent times it becomes necessary for the state to support them in all ways possible and ensure the benefits reach everyone in need. Strengthening the PDS scheme and ensuring the beneficiaries get the financial aid they need would help to the survival of many of these workers. (Sumalatha et al. 2021)

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