

A Study on Impact of COVID – 19 on home-based Women workers in India

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Abstract

Unorganised sector provide employment to 92% of the workforce, where 96% of women are employed in this sector. From global perspective 61% of labour force are employed in informal sector. This paper tries to study the impact of COVID-19 on home-based women workers in India with main objective of highlighting the challenges faced by home-based women workers during this pandemic and to suggest measures to Government to provide safety net to home-based women workers. To undertake this study secondary data has been used since the study has been conducted during lockdown period. The study highlights problems of women workers such as job loss, domestic violence, no pay, excessive household burden, reverse migration, small spaces, debt and lack of social security. In response to this challenges Government can provide employment opportunities to women in health care services, providing unemployment allowances, giving food security, framing policy for women working in unorganised sector and making health and safety guidelines for workforce employed in unorganised sector.

KEYWORDS: Unorganised sector, home - based workers, COVID – 19, women workers, reverse migration

Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing importance of the unorganised sector. A sector which constitute 92% of workforce employed in the sector, particularly women which constitute 96% of all female workforce in this sector (Jhabvala,2000). From global perspective around 61% of world population are employed in informal sector. The term unorganised/ informal are synonymously used in Indian context. The unorganised sector workers include small and marginal farmers, forest workers, agricultural labourers, Beedi workers, garment stitchers, rag pickers and many more who does not have fixed employer and work on contractual basis to earn a living from whatever paltry assets and expertise they possess and are not regulated or protected by any state.

In this crisis of Covid-19, the Government in India has tried to control the spread of disease through travel restriction, social distancing, lockdown and curfew. However, in this situation the people in formal sector are better as they are able to work from home and earn their monthly income, but one sector that has affected badly is the unorganised/ informal sector and women, particularly, are the first one to lose their job (Moussié, R. and Staab, 2020). Among all the section we have tried to study the impact of Covid-19 on home - based women workers in India as they are one who have lost their job first and will be the last one to recover.

Objectives

- To highlight the problems faced by home-based women workers during Covid 19

- To suggest measures Government can undertake to provide safety net to home-based women workers

Research Methodology

The paper is descriptive in nature and is based on secondary data which had been collected from online journal, article, magazine and website respectively.

Review of Literature

(Sinha, 2020) the author has highlighted the miserable plight of women working in unorganised sector during this pandemic, she has particularly focussed on overwhelming negative impact on the urban working poor, majority of them working in the informal economy, where women form larger share of informal economy as compared to men. She has given suggestion to devise strategies such as setting up of recovery funds for domestic and home-based workers, providing new opportunities for women workers such as giving them training to become care workers, home based garment workers can be given the work of manufacturing personal protective equipment and mask which are in great demand. While framing solutions to Covid 19 the problems of these women workers need to be acknowledge by the Government. The article does not give deep insight of challenges faced by women workers.

(WIEGO, 2020) in its article WIEGO has highlighted the situation of Subcontracted home workers who form an important part in global supply chain, however, for several weeks and even months these home-based workers have not received orders or regular orders has not been renewed. The article state though government has announced emergency aid to informal workers, home-based workers are not included in emergency relief packages across most Asian Countries. Few of home-based workers have turned this crisis situation to their advantage by putting their skill to make mask and gown for police and medical purpose respectively. Small spaces and lockdown have increased the problem of women workers as they have to give additional time for household work, child care and cooking as majority of family members are sheltering at home due to lockdown.

(Sewa, n.d.,2020) the report was prepared from the survey which was done by SEWA members from 20 different trades across 11 states on awareness about COVID and its impact on their income and their families, their access to portable water, and medical facilities. Traders such as domestic workers, street vendors, home-based workers, agricultural labourers, beedi rollers, artisans, construction workers and many more were interviewed. The common problem that exist across the board is the problem of job loss due to spread of virus and abrupt lockdown, non-payment of previous dues by the employer, no or less hygiene practiced by the people due to lack of knowledge about the causes of spread of virus and congested stay. No jobs for daily wages workers, hospitality industries and MNREGA work has stopped in Kerala. Few domestic workers have started work to maintain the distance which they can't manage at home. Parents report struggling everyday to keep children at home in safe and hygienic condition and also to keep up with the home-schooling demand due to their own limited educational knowledge.

(Joseph, 2020)the article tries to understand the current delay in the implementation of welfare measures for domestic workers and highlights the deep – rooted injustices done to these workers since decades. The author has tried to surface few of them in his article to indicate the reason for the miserable plight of domestic worker during

this pandemic. Problems such as excessive burden of household work for women, undervaluation of work, migrant nature of labours, low dignity at social structure, increasing financial burden, depletion of saving due to prolong lockdown, malnourished women workers, domestic violence on women workers and orphaned women workers are the common problem faced by domestic workers across the country.

The above review of literature has focussed on many challenges and demand serious Government intervention to improve the condition of workers in the unorganised sector.

WEIGO has categorised home based workers into two categories, one being self-employed home - based workers and other being sub-contracted home - based workers. The former is the one who buy their own raw materials, equipment and supplies, bear their own electricity and other overhead expenditure and sell the final output to local customers and sometimes to international market players and latter are the one who are contracted by individual entrepreneur or firms, or through intermediaries. They purchase raw material from these contractors and are paid per piece. They do not supply the product themselves and are even unaware where the final goods will be sold and in which market. They just produce it and give it to the contractor or the intermediary.

Home-based women workers

In case of home-based work, women mostly fall in the category of sub-contracted work as they are illiterate or less qualified and are mostly specialised in performing household work and work related with stitching and other related work. Most of the home-based women work perform work such as embroidery on saree, dress, fixing lace on saree or dupatta, fixing diamond on bangles, clips ,necklace respectively, making buckles, packing bindis, and other such subsidiary jobs for which they earn meagre Rs.8 to Rs.10 per day for 5-6 hours work per day.(Bhatt et al., 1988)

The main challenges faced by the home – based women workers are as follows.

Job loss – the lockdown which has been imposed in many areas and cities by the Government due to Covid-19 has restricted the mobility of these home-based worker since they can't get the raw material from the contractor, which has ultimately forced them to be without job.

No pay or less pay- Many women workers have complained about no pay for the work done by them before the lockdown and they believe they won't get any job for another six months(Sewa, n.d.). if at all they get some work they have accept it at low wage.

Small spaces- Most of the home-based women workers lives in small dwelling with little space which is also their work place, with lockdown all the members are staying in the small space and thus competing for space for their uses, which has made the situation worse as they are not able to maintain hygiene

Extra work burden – Most of the women household chore has increased as all the members are staying at home throughout the day and their time spend in cooking, cleaning and maintaining hygiene in the house has increased.

Reverse migration – the women who are the sole earner of their family are forced to move to native place, who have been working in cities and towns since decades have

to again go back, since for months they are without any work and are not getting any support from government or any external agency thus making their survival difficult.

Domestic Violence – home-based women workers normally belongs to lower strata of the society are facing high level of domestic violence since husband of many women's don't earn and depend on their wife earning, due to lockdown the supply of income has stopped and they are not able to satisfy their demand of alcohol and other habits, which has made the situation of these home-based women workers more difficult.

Debt – the pandemic has increase the financial debt of the family and family where women are sole bread winner , it has become a challenge for women to survive in this patriarchal society.

Lack of social security – Women in unorganised sector is not covered under any state government and hence no social security is provided to them and thus they face severe financial difficulties

The above challenges clearly state the miserable plight of these women workers and shortfall in Government policies in providing social security to women workers in the informal economy. This short fall was existing since decades; however, it became more prominent during this uncertain period where everyone is looking at Government to provide them some security to sustain their living.

Policy Discussion

The Government of India has launched the Garib Kalyan Rozgar Abhiyan (GKRA) an initiative to solve the problems of migrant workers due to COVID-19. It is rural public works scheme, launched on 20th June,2020 and aims to give 125 days of employment to 670,000 migrant workers, as approximately more than half of the total migrant labour force are forced to go back to rural areas. The scheme is extended to 116 districts in six state which includes UttarPrades, Bihar, Madhyapradesh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Odhissa. (TOI,2020) However, no explicit measures have been taken by Government to protect the women working in the informal sector. Certain other direct transfer have been arranged for senior citizen, widow, farmers and MNREGA workers. Thus, most of the measures taken by the Government has not included the informal economy in its policy ambit.(KPMG,2020)

Suggestive measures for Government

Employing women in health care services –In current situation these home-based women workers can be given contracts to prepare mask and gown for medical services and common public, thus enabling them to survive in this adverse situation.

Policy for women workers in informal sector- Majority workforce in informal sector are women, hence, Government should incorporate them in policy making and provide separate relief packages for women to help them from challenges they are facing during COVID-19.

Unemployment allowance – Unemployment allowance in cash or kind to be provided in collaboration with agency such as SEWA, SHGs to women workers to provide them financial security.

Food Security- Government should provide additional food grains through PDS in addition to those who are registered under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna

Yojana. This will help women to maintain the food and nutritional requirement of the themselves and children.

Health and safety standards – this pandemic has demanded the Government of India to consider health and safety measures seriously for workers in unorganised sector particularly women. It should be made mandatory for the employer to provide safety equipment for labours employed specially during this pandemic.

Conclusion

The above study clearly indicates the major challenges faced by home-based women workers in India and it also draws the drawbacks in the policy framing of the government. The sector which provide employment to vast population is still not under the ambit of any policy of government. This pandemic has raised alarm for the policy maker to frame policy to protect the interest of the women workforce which form the major segment of the unorganised sector. Providing relief packages is a short-term solution, what is needed is to provide employment opportunities to women to bring them back on path of survival and get rid of poverty and mounting debt which has increased manifold times during this period of crisis. Health and safety measures should be laid down for employers while hiring worker in unorganised sector which would safeguard the health and life of these women workers in times of uncertainty, should be given prime importance which would give confidence to these women to work. ultimately as it is said if government don't provide solution for this vast women workforce they may die out of hunger if not COVID - 19.

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