



Gender in Focus

Originally published: IWWAGE (July 2021)

Introduction

Eighteen months on, the COVID-19 crisis continues to be a devastating force, particularly for women. The pandemic is disproportionately affected women and their participation in the labour force. The Gender in Focus Report (July 2021), a quarterly published by the Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls shines a light on how the pandemic has affected women by engaging in multiple debates around the issue, including for example, whether women should be paid wages of house work, how data can be collected from women especially when only phone surveys are feasible, and how the Indian economy can build forward, whilst keeping the movement equitable for all.



Key Highlights

A Primary Study of Urban Informal Workers in India: More than 90% of workers in India are informally employed. While COVID-19 has severely impacted all informal workers, women and men are affected differently. Women were more likely to be at the bottom of the informal economy hierarchy, making them more vulnerable. A large-scale primary survey was conducted at the end of 2020, by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) together with IWWAGE, to generate evidence on working conditions in the urban informal economy and the impact of COVID-19 on informal workers' livelihoods and earnings.

The study, conducted via phone surveys across 5 cities – Delhi, Lucknow, Ranchi, Ahmedabad and Trivandrum, found that low income and savings levels, lack of employment security, lack of access to social protection and inability to switch to a remote working model afflicted most workers in the urban informal economy and rendered millions jobless for several months.

Key findings of the study include:

1. 54% domestic workers continue to struggle for visibility and work in dire working conditions, mostly without any contract, and 38% work based on an oral agreement. 67% said they never got any increment, while 25% report getting a yearly raise. 15% of the domestic workers reported that they received a weekly day off, while 53% had no provision for paid leaves.
2. Construction workers were one of the hardest hit during the lockdown. The construction industry has been a significant absorber of workers leaving agriculture over the past two decades. However, 78% of the construction workers lost their employment, and 91% reported a drop in their income during the lockdown period. Nearly 50% of the construction workers interviewed said they did not receive any skills training for construction work and 44% learned on-the-job. Female construction workers were even more disadvantaged.
3. Informal workers on average witnessed a 90% drop in their income, with little signs of recovery to previous income levels pre-lockdown.

What Determines of Women's Labour Force Participation: India has an abysmally low female labour force participation rate (FLFPR). The declining trend in the female labour force participation rate started in the mid-2000s and has continued despite a rising GDP, increasing educational attainment, rising household incomes and declining fertility rate. An April 2021 Working Paper released by IWWAGE explores the determinants of women's labour force participation in India. Key findings include:

1. The decline in FLFPR is not limited to young women workers. Women's participation is volatile across all age brackets, especially between 25 to 59 years.

2. While urban FLFPR has been traditionally low, it only registered a marginal decline to 25% to 22.5% since 1993-94. Rural women's participation rate declined by 24 percentage points since 1993-94.
3. Women's participation in rural areas dropped across all states during 2011-12 and 2018-19, due to declining employment opportunities for women. More education women were unemployed in 2018-19, while their enrolment in higher education continued to rise.

A panel hosted by IWWAGE, consisting of eminent experts and professors from the world over, also discussed unresolved and debatable issues pertaining to wages and salary for unpaid domestic work. This included how to value unpaid domestic and care work, who pays for it, whether the payment should be conditional, unconditional, short-term or long-term etc. They also discussed the whether it might entrench archaic gender norms in the household, and whether it would help close the gender gap in the labour force.

Read more: <https://www.knomad.org/publication/internal-migration-india-integrating-migration-development-and-urbanization-policies>

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