

Covid'19 and its effect on Women Migrant workers

(By Shallu Jaglan)

Introduction

The impacts and implications of the COVID-19 are different for men and women and may create greater inequalities for people who are in vulnerable positions, such as migrants, according to UN Women.

Daily news articles are filled with reports of how lockdown has pushed thousands of migrants to the sidelines, but what remains away from much gaze is the condition of migrant women who are already so marginalized and are more prone to the adverse effects of the lockdown. This article is an attempt to discover how this lockdown has affected migrant women and discusses the other socio-economic challenges faced by them. Some of these challenges have been present before the lockdown period, but now they have emerged in a revised form, adding to the difficulties of migrant women.

Entailment of specific risks on the population of migrant women

Suspension of transport services: Tens of thousands of daily-wage migrant workers suddenly found themselves without jobs or a source of income when India announced a lockdown on March 24.

Overnight, the cities they had helped build and run seemed to have turned their backs on them, the trains and buses which should have carried them home suspended. So, with the looming fear of hunger, men, women and children were forced to begin arduous journeys back to their villages - cycling or hitching rides on tuk-tuks, lorries, water tankers and milk vans.

Mohammad Muzzafar (42), a native of Purnia in Bihar, had decided to walk back on May 18 from Vadodara. He embarked his journey back home, without any income or food. He is the sole breadwinner of the family of six. Back in his village, without any farmland or source of income, uncertainties loom large over making ends meet. [Source: The Indian Express, May 24, 2020]

A migrant labour's pregnant wife (Bindia), who walked over 100 km from Ludhiana in Punjab, delivered a girl child after reaching Ambala in Haryana, but the baby died shortly after birth. Ram said that he and his pregnant wife decided to walk to Ambala after they did not get registration in special trains. Bindia was very weak as she did not get a proper diet required by a pregnant woman, the husband said, adding they did not have enough money as he lost his job during lockdown.

Job insecurity: According to the IOM's World Migration Report 2020, migrant women represent around 74% of the service industry, which includes domestic work, and in many cases experience job insecurity. A significant portion of their income goes towards supporting their families. During the COVID-19 outbreak, mobility and travel restrictions are jeopardizing the income of migrant women, particularly domestic workers.

An estimated 12.2 crore Indians lost their jobs during the coronavirus lockdown in April, according to CMIE. More than 3/4th of those who lost jobs are wage labourers and small traders. Over 122 million people in India lost their jobs in April, according to estimates of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy. Around 75% of them were small traders and wage-labourers. The small traders and wage-labourers category lost more than 90 million jobs in April 2020 compared to the 2019-20 average recorded by The Hindu. Also, the uncertainties of the market have a huge impact on small businesses and self-employed people which includes rural women employed with some organisation, small peasants engaged in seasonal farming, Adivasis sustaining themselves by selling forest produce etc.

The Covid-19 lockdown has shredded the fragile economy of the Kamars, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group in Chhattisgarh, who depend on a trickle of income from weaving baskets and selling mahua flowers.

The markets and weekly haats are closed due to corona," says Jamuna Bai. "So, we are not even able to sell [as a decent price] the mahua flowers that we collect. This in turn means we are not able to buy anything for ourselves due to a lack of money." Her husband Siyaram died, in his mid-40s, of diarrhoea four years ago, leaving her and the children in a grim survival battle. The lockdown affects not just their income from baskets, but also from other sources.

(Source: ruralindiaonline.org)

Economic spin-offs: UNDP indicated that during a health crisis with implications for the mobility of people, such as COVID-19, migrant women who are domestic workers, and especially those that are irregular, become more dependent on their employers and are further removed from social protection services. Even when the isolation from the health crisis ends, the economic consequences can expose women to sexual exploitation, which occurred in the Ebola outbreak 2013-2016.

As the threat of Coronavirus plays on the minds of consumers, hand sanitizers have again become scarcely available across India. More than half the people who wanted to buy hand sanitizers couldn't buy one and another 26% had to buy an unknown brand, as per a survey by Local Circles, a social media platform.

Source: theeconomictimes.com

Companies are already reporting labour shortages at ports and factories, potentially exacerbating an economic slowdown. Goldman Sachs Group Inc. this month slashed its annual growth forecast for India to the slowest pace since 1992, around when a balance of payments crisis brought down the sitting government.

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Rural India is incapable of absorbing the estimated 23 million interstate and intrastate migrant labour who might return home from urban areas due to the Covid-19 lockdown. This is because the rural economy is already overburdened, excessively dependent on agriculture, and has widespread hidden underemployment, data show.

Daily wage workers of Rajasthan have got employment under MNREGA, but this doesn't reduce the extent of their helplessness. With *nautapa*, and the subsequent rise in temperature till 47° it is becoming very difficult for labourers to work under scorching heat for rupees 220 a day. In many work sites, there is no proper facility for medical kits and hand sanitizers. Though face masks have been distributed. Drinking water is not available at some sites. Also, a large number of female labourers bring their small kids with them since a lot of areas do not have day-care facilities or are too far[anganvadi]. [Source: Rajasthan Patrika, May 27,2020]

Xenophobic rejection: The stigmatizing idea that migrants have COVID-19 just because they are migrants, makes them the target of threats. In the specific case of migrant women, this discrimination can have consequences such as the lack of adequate care in a medical centre and other healthcare settings that are directly related to being women (such as prenatal care, or legal and psychosocial support due to gender based violence).

Migrants from India's Christian-dominated north-eastern states have complained of discrimination, saying they are accused of carrying coronavirus just because of their Mongoloid facial features. North-eastern youths in national capital New Delhi and other cities have complained of being turned away from grocery shops and supermarkets for fear that they could be carrying the virus

As coronavirus was first reported in China last December, some Indians have linked the virus with people from the northeast who they think look like Chinese people. Several videos have gone viral showing young people from the northeast being denied entry to shops under the pretext that they carry coronavirus.

As per footage of the incident, a group of migrants, including women, were seen squatting on the road near a checkpoint in Bareilly as officials in full protection gear sprayed a solution through a hose pipe on them. The migrants are not only clothed but also have their luggage strapped onto their bodies even as they get drenched. While at least two officials film the incident, one of them can be heard asking the migrants to keep their eyes closed.

The nodal officer in-charge of COVID-19 in Bareilly, Ashok Gautam, confirmed that the administration did bathe the migrants with disinfectant, chlorine mixed with water, but clarified it was not a chemical solution. Mr. Gautam said the administration had resorted to spraying the migrants with the disinfectants after the huge rush of incoming migrants who arrived in special buses run by the government.

(thehindu.com).

Greater insecurity against the virus: The limited ability of some migrant women to access protection materials such as face masks and hand sanitizer, as well as the greater tendency to live in overcrowded conditions, leaves this population less prepared to face the virus, indicates UNDP. A survey of 11,159 migrant workers stranded in various States found that between April 8 and April 13, more than 90% did not receive rations from the government. Close to 90% of those surveyed did not get paid by their employers. From March 27 to April 13, 70% of the surveyed workers had only less than ₹200 left with them. The survey was conducted by the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN).

Concluding remarks:

Although government agencies kept promising safety and security of migrant workers in the cities, sluggish implementation mechanism, poor coordination amongst states and delay in announcing relief packages resulted in havoc on the vulnerability of migrant workers. Here we again confront the question of just distribution in our society. The big holes in our socio-political structure are visible more than ever before.

To prevent the adverse effect of COVID-19 taking a disproportionate toll on migrant women, policymakers should focus on these priorities: extending access to social protection, ensuring the rights and safety of essential informal workers, and supporting informal worker's organisations and generating new sources of employment.