

Women are becoming less visible in India's workforce – but are bearing government's responsibilities

The unpaid, intensive forms of work women have been undertaking actually ensure the survival of families and communities.

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Women and children in Mumbai's Dharavi area during a fumigation drive to contain the spread of Covid-19 in April 2020. | Francis Mascarenhas/Reuters

Women workers in India have been disproportionately hurt by the Covid-19-related lockdown and the ensuing economic downturn. While 36% of male workers lost employment during the lockdown in 2020, 74% female workers lost jobs.

As per [data](#) from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, 78% of men who lost jobs regained their employment after lockdown. But only 40% of women who lost work did so.

Overall, due to Covid-19, the male and female working population fell sharply to 40.03% in 2020-'21 from 42.68% in 2019-'20.

The male work participation, which stood at 70.52% in 2016, declined by more than 4 percentage points between 2020 and 2021. The dismal women's work participation rate of 11.88% in 2016-'17 dropped to 7.8% in 2020-'21, according to data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy.

This decline has come to strengthen the view of women as dependents, specially by the current government that has chosen to employ the [language of protection in its policies](#) relating to women. By contrast, our research shows that the invisible, unpaid and intensive forms of work women have been undertaking actually ensure the survival of families and communities.

This work has increased exponentially during the pandemic as women have had to shoulder the responsibilities of an absent government and indifferent industrialists and businessmen.

Rise in care work

Feminist studies have for long revealed that though the work of women is not only invisible and unrecognised, it is crucial to sustaining households as well as enabling the market economy to function.

It is the work of women within their homes that enable the paid work of their spouses, the education of their children and the reproduction of workers essential to the economy. [Women spend on average 352 minutes a day on unpaid work as against 52 minutes by men](#), according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. The pandemic has only increased the burden of women.

According to the [India Working Survey](#), the proportion of working women who spent more than two hours a day cooking went up from 20% before the pandemic to almost 62% post pandemic in Karnataka and from 12% to 58% in Rajasthan. This domestic work included cooking, washing/cleaning, fetching water, working in the kitchen garden, producing goods for household use as well as care responsibilities including childcare and elderly care.



Women walk on a deserted street in New Delhi in April 2020 during the lockdown to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Credit: PTI

A smaller [study conducted by the Impact and Policy Research Institute](#) amongst 1,039 women from Bihar, showed an increase in care work for 50% of those interviewed. With the explosion of the number of infections and the complete saturation of the hospitals, female care work at home has exploded especially for low income and poor groups.

Female work of care is not only individual: women's groups have extended care to communities [feeding poor families](#) and [migrant workers](#), [cooking and delivering food to the sick](#), [arranging ambulances](#), [hospital beds and oxygen](#) for the sick.

As Indian industrialists and businessmen, big and small, practically washed their hands off, leaving millions of migrant workers in the lurch, women left behind in villages took on this responsibility, feeding and caring for people that was soon in high demand once the economy opened up.

Debt work

With the explosion of debt and sources of debt, Indian household consumer debt increased threefold between 2012 and 2020. Field work done in Tamil Nadu shows that debt weighs disproportionately on the shoulders of poor women as they are responsible for managing family budgets and make ends meet. Women juggle several loans – from – microfinance companies, pawnshops, informal moneylenders, neighbors and family.

Debt work consists of negotiating amounts, prices, terms and repayments, both individually and collectively. As women rarely own income or assets, they build a reputation of creditworthiness by creating and nurturing relationships. This requires constant relational and emotional work, including provision of services in exchange for loans.

The high volume of debt transactions, the time invested, the routine and repetition, the required skills and know-how, all amount to a true form of unpaid and invisible work.

Poor households have taken on more debt to compensate for falling incomes, government pensions coming to a halt and rising food needs as anganwadis that provide food to children and nursing mothers closed down. Millions of defaults were witnessed in microfinance, reduced microfinance lending due to the risk, microfinance institutions demanding repayment despite a moratorium, resulting in the suicides of women.

Women expended considerable energies avoiding loan sharks and some women fell into debt bondage. Women have had to postpone repayment schedules, implying tough negotiations, while at the same time seeking new sources of cash that have been ever dwindling. Women have had to use personal relations knocking on the doors of all their contacts and demanding, sometimes imploring.



Migrant workers in Ahmedahad wait to get on a bus to reach a railway station to board a train home

to Bihar in May 2020 during the lockdown to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Credit: Amit Dave/Reuters

Political work

Our field work in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu reveals that women from poor households spend time and efforts building and maintaining political support, to keep ration shops running, to access old age, disability or widow pensions, schemes for the education of female children, medical insurance schemes such as Ayushman Bharat, various agricultural subsidies or loan write offs and housing schemes.

Access to these benefits are crucial for the survival of poor families as they help supplement low incomes. Women have to perform political work, building networks with government officers and elected representatives, engaging in everyday negotiations with them, bartering votes for benefits and demanding accountability and transparency.

Women have always had to monitor subsidised food shops, keeping checks on both quality and quantity of food provided. The pandemic had made this more difficult with [subsidised food shops remaining closed](#), [infrequent distributions and long waits for food](#) sometimes resulting in [poor women taking on the government's task of distributing subsidized food themselves](#).

In some cases accessing food has been dangerous with women having to [endure the harassment by the polices](#) or being [beaten up for waiting in lines for food](#).

Women have always been holding our society together through work that escapes our common sense understandings of work and labour. This has increased exponentially during the pandemic. Contrary to the rhetoric of women as dependents or as needing protection, we need to recognise that it is women who have substituted for an absent government and indifferent industrialists and businessmen, through their unpaid, invisible and unrecognised work.

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