Informal Labour Blues: Effects of Covid-19 and Beyond on Women Belonging to Backward Castes in Hyderabad, India

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Abstract: COVID-19 struck people all over the world, indiscriminately, altering human living conditions as we know it. It had disproportionate effects on those less fortunate, especially women in marginalized communities. This research delves into the short-term and potential long-term effects of COVID-19 on women belonging to backward castes engaged in informal labour work in the city of Hyderabad, state of Telangana, India. This in-depth ethnographic inquiry observed the research participants within their localities for over a year (2020-2021) and adopts an approach rooted in intersectionality and complexity. Semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews and participant observation were employed across a sample of 30 women participants. Findings indicate that the economic impact of the pandemic on informal labour is multifold where women’s jobs are the household’ only salvation. Participants reported receiving none to scattered benefits from governmental and non-governmental actors. As is the case in informal labour markets, lack of job security and safety nets skyrocketed participants’ anxiety for a secure future. The gendered effects of the pandemic are observed through women’ unfulfilled dietary needs and their increased household work. Domestic violence is prevalent in these communities. There is high trust in available COVID-19 vaccines.

Keywords: Gender and informal labour; Gendered effects of COVID-19; Backward caste communities; Women as informal labour; Inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Two billion of the world’ population aged 15 and above work in the informal economy, representing 61.2 per cent of the world’ employment (Chakraborty, 2021). Employment in India is heavily informal with a whopping 90 per cent of the working population employed in the informal economy (Mansoor and Shekar, 2021). In a country accounting for one of the world’ largest proportions of informal sector reliant employment, it is crucial to dissect the nature of ‘informality’ which is multi-layered. According to the International Labour Organization’ (ILO) statistical definition, informal sector and informal employment are complementary concepts where employment in the informal sector is enterprise-based while informal employment is job-based. General employment in the informal sector is understood through the characteristics of the place of work of the worker and informal employment is related to the employment relationship and social protection associated with the job of the worker. In a country as diverse
as India with a myriad of communities, it is extremely complicated to develop interventions and policy recommendations at scale. It is widely understood that countries with high informality face a high number of development challenges, such as poverty, inequality, weak governance and so on. COVID-19 has brought to fore the ‘informalness’ when referring to those engaged as informal labour and the complexities that come along by the virtue of the type of job and workplace one is engaged in.

Informality is found not only in the traditional informal economy but also in the formal sector. The paradoxical trajectory of the Indian economy is such that the high economic growth has not led to adequate employment generation let alone employment diversification. While formal employment has stagnated with insufficient paid employment opportunities (Mehrotra, 2019), the majority of the workforce is pushed into self-employment or informal employment exposing them to the uncertainties of the market. Broadly, informal employment comprises unincorporated private enterprises owned by individuals or households engaged in the sale and production of goods and services, domestic workers, contributing family workers, casual day labourers and workers in the formal sector whose employer does not cover social security benefits. Lack of social protection plays a central feature in the informalness of informal employment. The diversity of the informal economy is immense in terms of age, level of education, the status of employment, rural vs urban locations, coverage of socio-economic benefits and so on. The International Labour Organization’ 2018 report notes that the level of informality varies inversely with the level of socio-economic status and level of education. Developing and low- and middle-income countries contribute heavily to informal employment, with those who have completed primary education or illiterate being highly likely to pursue informal employment.

In India, informal employment is class and caste sensitive with a higher percentage of backward caste communities, both men and women, in informal labour jobs (Gaurav and Sheikh, 2020). In terms of employment, members of the scheduled caste (SC), scheduled tribe (ST) and other backward classes (OBC) are among the most excluded groups as per the India Exclusion Report 2019-20. Individuals from historically disadvantaged communities, such as the SCs and STs, have lower chances of secure employment and their income is either low or uncertain. While economic growth is expected to aid historically oppressed communities, India shows that the underlying social discrimination has further widened, especially for Muslims, youth and women belonging to backward castes. Among the poorest consumption class, nine out of ten persons are engaged in informal employment as of 2017-2018 (Chakraborty, 2021). Moreover, women are mostly involved in productive or reproductive activity though much of
their work is invisible. They are largely employed in low skilled, low paid informal work with little
to no social security. Most women work as domestic workers or are self-employed home-based
workers. Additionally, the nature and extent of marginalization for women varies by castes and
religions which points to caste and religion-based disadvantages.

Gender discrimination is palpable in the informal labour market. Women informal
workers cluster at the lower end of the informal occupational spectrum working as home-based
workers and domestic workers, being paid less than half of men’ remuneration for similar jobs.
This wage gap varies across social groups and wage disparities persist because of gendered
divisions of tasks. Women tend to be engaged in cleaning and care services while male domestic
workers engage in better-paid jobs, such as drivers, security guards, gardeners and so on,
according to the International Labour Organization’ report in 2013. Among groups (men and
women), such as domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, construction labourers
and waste pickers, women account for 54 per cent while men account for 36 per cent of the
informal employment. None of these individuals possessed any social protection or job
contracts. Further, women have low and erratic earnings without any protection against loss of
work or income. Women’ unpaid work and care taking duties influence their work choices as they
tend to prioritize their unpaid work, while in search of paid work, which invisibles their
economic contributions. The International Labour Organization’ 2018 report shows that the
gender dimension of informality is related to poverty, indicating that women are poorer relative
to men engaged as informal workers. This also implies that most individuals enter informal
employment due to a lack of opportunities for less literate individuals in the formal economy
and the absence of alternative means of living.

COVID-19 struck people all over the world, indiscriminately, altering human living
conditions as we know it. Preliminary data and early indirect evidence from several parts of the
world indicate that the incidence of the disease is not class-neutral, suggesting that socially
marginalized groups would be at higher risk of mortality due to COVID-19 (Deshpande and
Ramachandran, 2020). India’ lockdown, imposed in the last week of March 2020, was among the
strictest in the world. With little to no income, these socially marginalized sections face
challenges to their livelihoods, health, familial and socio-economic conditions. India was the
third worst-hit country in 2020, consisting of the largest number of confirmed cases, totalling
10,451, 3462, in Asia and in the absence of hard data on the impact of the ongoing crisis,
anecdotal information is key to understanding the condition of informal labourers in urban
India. In what was the onset of COVID-19’ second wave, India was registering around 2,00,000
cases every day from early April to June 2021. With the third wave looming in, the cumulative
impact of the pandemic is not gender or caste neutral, especially with women facing deleterious effects. Within the informal workforce with its persistent gender-based occupational segregation, the pandemic is intensifying pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities across various spheres, such as health, security, economy and social protection. The immediate economic impact of the pandemic induced lockdown is intense for informal workers but, moreover, women mostly bear the brunt of loss of jobs since the gendered division of tasks and gender discrimination has been high even pre-lockdown.

This unprecedented shock to informal workers across several phases of the lockdown mandated by the central government is being captured widely by numerous research institutions and organizations globally. The Institute of Social Studies Trust’ (ISST) rapid assessment surveys (2020) on women informal workers in five different sectors in Delhi (domestic work, street vending, waste picking, home-based work and construction work) found that 83 per cent of women participants witnessed a severe income drop, which also varied across the informal sectors they were engaged in (Chakraborty, 2020), 66 per cent reported an increase in household domestic chores with 36 per cent reporting an increased burden of child and elderly care work during this period. The closure of schools has led to an upsurge in their volume of work, with women carrying the additional burden of caretaking of the young and elderly. The reasons for the drop in income ranged from reasons such as inability to go out due to the lockdown, police patrolling, fear of contracting the disease, and unavailability of protective equipment. Preliminary data analysis of an ongoing study by the ISST shows that 64 per cent of women claimed to have lost the means to work, while 18 per cent reported a significant fall in income even after the lockdown period. Almost nine out of ten admitted that the COVID-19 pandemic had increased mental stress and tension in their family. For many, the fear of lost livelihoods outweighed the fear of contracting the virus (Chakraborty, 2021).

As per the State of Working India (2021) report by the Azim Premji University, income and employment are facing a hard road to recover to pre-pandemic levels in late 2020 with the second wave of COVID-19 adding to the economic distress. It is estimated that 2 crores 30 lakh additional individuals fell below the national minimum wage poverty line. Informal workers’ pre-pandemic income levels have already been low due to which, as prices of essential commodities inflated during the pandemic and lockdowns, informal workers were pushed further into relative poverty. Many workers had borrowed loans at higher interest rates leading to a never-ending cycle of debt. As per a survey by the Action Aid Association of India, 58 per cent of the informal workers had to borrow money to meet their daily expenses (Sapkal et al., 2020).
The urban labour market in cities, such as New Delhi, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Chennai and so on, witnesses a huge inflow of migrant workers from villages far and near who migrate in pursuit of employment opportunities. The urban labour market is largely informal, lacking a social security net, which increases labour vulnerability and distress during lockdowns. The imagery of COVID-19 effects in India is associated with migrant workers on foot traversing long distances to their hometowns amidst the imposed lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. Amidst appeals of the government to avoid panic and assurances of support, people chose to move temporarily from the cities due to the informality of the urban labour market.

The Periodic Labour Survey (PLFS 2018-19) of India shows that around 128 million individuals (15-59 years old) are in the labour force of the urban sector of which 116 million are employed. Of the total employed individuals, 77 per cent are informal workers who are vulnerable to economic and political shocks in urban areas in comparison with formal workers in the public or private organized sectors. Among different informal workers, casual workers are the most susceptible to economic shocks as they are usually engaged in unskilled and low-paid occupational jobs. A high proportion of these workers are marginalized and are migrant labourers. Data shows that 60 per cent of the 7.3 lakh workers who returned to their hometowns in Madhya Pradesh (a state in central India) from nearby cities belonged to Dalit (the lowermost caste, historically categorized as untouchables) and Adivasi (tribal) communities. Workers who migrate from rural to urban areas live in urban slums and informal labour settlement areas. Their housing and basic amenities are of questionable safety and security with their necessities such as food being difficult to arrange if not for their daily employment. Among communities engaged as informal workers, Dalits, Adivasis, and Other Backward Castes (OBCs) earn less than the other communities. This is primarily because of these groups' structural disadvantages, such as historical oppression and marginalization, created by systemic differences in terms of endowment, opportunities and skills. The disadvantages in terms of literacy and skills make them prone to exploitation. Comparing wage earnings of informal workers to the minimum wage stipulated for unskilled workers according to the Minimum Wage Act 1948, around 32 per cent of all urban informal workers do not make bare minimum wage (Informality: The cause of labour distress, 2021). About 11 million employed informal workers earn less than the poverty line. For instance, 41 per cent of informal workers in Delhi and Maharashtra (a state in central India) earn less than the stipulated daily wage for unskilled workers. The data indicates depressed wages, precarious living standards and impoverished conditions of the urban informal workers.
Urban informal workers remain highly vulnerable to wage inequality rendering them poor and struggling in normal times irrespective of the pandemic. A nationwide lockdown only deprives the majority of the informal workforce of their earnings. Lack of alternate sources of employment or earnings along with inadequate government or civil society support forces workers to head to their hometowns for survival. Many such migrant informal workers plan to return to cities once lockdown restrictions are eased for better employment opportunities.

Telangana (TS), a South Indian state, has been consistently ranked as one of the top states that spend on welfare programmes for backward caste communities (Rahul, 2018; Telangana among top states in welfare spend, 2021). In 2021, the TS government has rolled out a high number of welfare programmes that comprise postnatal care, sheep distribution, land distribution, subsidized rice schemes and so on. A first in the country, TS’ Commission for Backward Classes took a historic decision in 2020 to include 17 more castes under the Other Backward Classes category (OBC) (Apparasu, 2020). Currently, there are 112 castes in the OBC category divided into groups (A, B, C, D) depending on their backwardness with 25 per cent reservation in education and employment. The decision to include 17 more castes was taken after a two-year long extensive study of the sociological conditions of most backward caste communities. Also, a first in the country, the TS government set an example to the rest of the states by implementing a Special Development Fund Act that transfers funds not utilized for SCs and STs in a given financial year to the subsequent year. Through this, in 2021, the TS government is set to provide power supply to tribal agricultural lands, facilities for women entrepreneurs and residential educational institutions (Telangana Today, 2021). Amidst COVID-19 and economic distress in 2021, the TS government launched a Dalit Scheme budget for the all-round development of backward castes in the state (Apparasu, 2021). These strides of the TS government make it an interesting case to examine the conditions of the marginalized communities in the state, during an unforeseen pandemic. Understanding how women from backward caste communities majorly engaged as informal labour in a state that is consistently implementing schemes for backward caste communities would enable in identifying on-ground problems.

Though the findings of this research inquiry are specific to this sample, they are comparable to the conditions of backward caste communities engaged as informal labour in several metropolitan cities in India. The Institutional Review Board approval has been granted by the University of Oregon. This research is generously funded by the Center for the study of Women in Society, University of Oregon.
APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This inquiry adopts an approach rooted in intersectionality and complexity.

Intersectionality ‘seeks to demonstrate the convergence of different types of exclusion and marginalization’ (Hankivsky, 2014). In this process, intersectionality unpacks the complexities of marginalized populations’ lived experiences to develop links with processes, structures, institutions or relationships that lead to their positive or negative experiences. Originally, intersectionality was introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 as a response to the exclusion of black women from feminist theory and race studies despite their ‘intersection’ in both these worlds (Mburu et al., 2014). With time, this approach has been adopted by numerous scholars and researchers to understand and transform inequalities, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Mohantry, 1984). Intersectionality has been widely used in social sciences with its applications to public health and systems research. It is understood to help unravel multiple dimensions associated with the research findings as it moves beyond investigating social hierarchies in isolation but as a collectively constituted and interacting.

Intersectionality requires consideration of the complex relationships between mutually constituting factors of social location and structural disadvantages to map and conceptualize determinants of equity and inequity in and beyond health. It encourages critical reflection and reflexivity of the researcher to examine the impact of and resistance to systems or structures that operate at a higher level. Intersectionality in anthropology is a well-developed concept. There are several debates around the level at which intersectionality operates, such as the structural or the individual level. But importantly, the intersectional analysis calls to avoid the narrow focus on one category or not accounting for multiple differences (Lutz, 2015). Anthropologists of colour have credited this approach as it offers a mode of critically interrogating, reflexive thinking and re-checking the production of ethnographic knowledge (Henne, 2018).

Hankivsky’ (2012) Intersectionality Based Analysis Framework (IBPA) explains the application of the same in diverse health and policy contexts. A few relevant tenets that capture the paradigm of intersectionality for this inquiry are – 1. Human lives cannot be reduced to single characteristics; 2. A human experience cannot be prioritized over the other; 3. Social categories or locations, such as ‘race’ethnicity, gender, class and so on, are socially constructed, fluid and flexible; and 4. Social locations are inseparable and shaped by mutually constituting social processes and structures, which are also shaped by power and influenced by both time and place.
The two core components of the IBPA are guiding principles which are to be used in concert with guiding questions. The guiding principles include a focus on equity, reflexivity, multilevel analysis, intersecting categories, and power. The focused questions involve how representations of COVID-19 have come about, how populations are differentially affected by the representation of COVID-19’s broader effects and existing inequities prior and as COVID-19 struck. The IBPA is envisioned to evolve and grow as used by researchers and policymakers. After consulting various case studies that have taken the IBPA approach, it is determined that this approach would be beneficial in unpacking the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (which is primarily a disease and hence, a health threat) and its accompanying socio-economic effects on marginalized communities.

Another theoretical frame of thinking that compliments IBPA has been adopted for this research inquiry, which is complexity theory. Complexity theory focuses on understanding the patterns of interaction between system elements at different levels and times, rather than analysing individual elements in isolation (Driebe and McDaniel, 2001). A complexity approach naturally presents boundaries to alternative ways of knowing. Instead of assuming direct cause and effect relationships, scholars are recognizing the importance of examining complexity arising from interactions between different health system elements (Gear et al., 2017).

A qualitative ethnographic research approach has been proved useful in identifying and exploring the complexities as it appreciates the ‘context’. An Australian study that conducted qualitative research (in-depth interviews) with 20 women 6 months after disclosing abuse found that a single standard intervention to help women stay safe from abuse will be ineffective unless it accounts for the diversity of women’ contexts in their trajectory of abuse (Spangaro et al., 2011). Similarly, in the context of COVID-19 and LMICs, simply rolling out government schemes and benefits might as well not help already discriminated backward caste communities involved in the insecure informal labour market. The reportage and research around COVID-19 needs to focus on social determinants, such as caste, class, gender and so on, more than ever to identify the intersectional nature of complex problems.

Choice of location and justification

The area for this inquiry is chosen to be the Baghlingampally, which is a commercial and residential neighbourhood in the capital city of TS, Hyderabad. The region has been home to the royal families of Hyderabad and was dotted with fruit gardens, leading to the prefix ‘Bagh’meaning garden. The small adjoining village called Lingampally housed a tank where queens would bathe. Eventually, the region gained the name Baghlingampally. In terms of an administrative unit, Baghlingampally is considered a village, falling in the district of Hyderabad.
The languages of this region are Telugu, Deccani, Hindi and Urdu. At present, Baghlingampally is inhabited by higher caste and formally employed communities as well as lower caste and informally employed communities. This is very much the depiction of modern-day cities in the country, comprising diverse communities with varying socio-economic conditions in the same geography. One of the slums in this region is the Palamuru Basti, where this research inquiry was undertaken. This basti or slum is inhabited mostly by migrants, from states such as Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. Some of them are migrants from within Telangana. They survive by engaging in construction labour work, selling vegetables, tailoring, ironing, barber work, cooking, washing clothes, caretaking and so on. There is one Anganwadi, a child care centre, in this locality.

The choosing of this research location owing to the region’ rich historic culture and heterogeneity is enhanced by the researcher’ access, proximity and connections with the informal labour settlements.

Research Questions

1. How did COVID-19 and the nation’ stringent lockdown impact women belonging to backward castes working as informal labour? What were the socio-economic impacts?
2. How did COVID-19 affect gender-based discrimination faced by these women? What were their coping mechanisms for dealing with stress or trauma?
3. How has the pandemic affected the voices of women and their agency?

Methods

To illustrate the lived experiences of women from backward caste communities engaged as informal labour in Palamuru Basti, the researcher has keenly observed the lives of those residing in this area, by conducting multiple visits from September 2020 till the end of data collection in July 2021 and has established connections with a few families. The research questions sought to garner information on the effects of COVID-19 on women from these communities, focusing on themes of gender discrimination, domestic or intimate partner violence, and gender inequality. To refine the schedule and research tools, in September 2020, a pilot test was conducted in another part of Hyderabad City called Hydernagar. The pilot test was conducted with 5 women engaged as informal labour (domestic help) in a residential society and belonging to backward caste communities. Although their living conditions are different, the demographic profiles are comparable. Findings from the pilot test indicate that the women experience a sense of loss and abandonment due to a lack of adequate support from local authorities. They feel unprepared to tackle the impending pandemic’ effects owing to their loss of income, minimal information about vaccination, and rising daily expenses.
Semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews and participant observation have been employed. There are 420 houses in Palamuru Basti. House to house visits were conducted to find consenting participants until the target sample size of 30 women was reached. This sample size was chosen as it supports in-depth inquiry in the stipulated timeline for the data collection. The goal was to attain saturation while sampling. Consulting established literature on qualitative research, such as Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Morse (1994), the suggested number of participants for an ethnographically oriented qualitative study was understood to be 30 to 50 participants. Given the pandemic, undertaking deep mixed-methods research was not possible, especially due to the lack of manpower and the multiple lockdowns imposed in the country making it challenging to access consenting research participants. The lack of timely and dynamic quantitative data about informal labourers in Hyderabad posed an obstacle to the possibilities of secondary quantitative data analysis. Further, COVID-19 is an unprecedented pandemic that warrants an in-depth inquiry to illustrate the social realities of research participants which call

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After employing the initial schedule and visual aids (which are graphic illustrations depicting daily chores, lifestyles and COVID-19 protocols) for the pilot test, the use of visual aids was dropped as they confused the research participants. The researcher decided, after discussing with a few members of the community, that an individual from within the community will be best placed to help deploy the research tools. This was decided to accommodate COVID-19 restrictions and, more importantly, the researcher's ‘outsider’ position relative to the community. The participants are less likely to converse freely, especially when they are insecure about their jobs. The participants seemed conscious to answer questions regarding employer-employee relations and COVID-19 welfare schemes rolled out by private and public actors. These are important questions that could not be avoided. Their consciousness stems from the fact that their employers belong to higher castes who might as well live in the same neighbourhood as the researcher. Hence, Palamuru Basti which is 3 hours away from the researcher’s residential area was chosen to eliminate all such emerging issues. Two female college graduates living in the basti were chosen to support this inquiry. The modalities of conducting this research inquiry are crucial to illustrate the real-life experiences of research participants.

The research tools are based on sources and measurement tools such as Oxfam impact evaluations (Lombardini et al., 2017), UN Women (2020) reports and nationally representative surveys in India which have been further contextualized. Questions on the indicators of gender equality, political and civic participation, gendered effects of COVID-19, women’ agency and informal employment conditions have been developed referring to widely conducted surveys in LMICs, such as those by the Institute of Labour Economics and Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, with a focus on India.

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for the use of robust qualitative methods. More so, the 16th Indian census supposed to be taken in 2021 has not been conducted yet with the 15th Indian census taken in 2011. It is important to note that the census data is the most vital data source that attempts to estimate the population based on socio-economic and caste status. Without the 2021 census, it has become challenging to understand the scale of the population involved in informal labour. The use of complexity and intersectionality is all the more crucial due to the lack of diverse data sources and insufficient secondary data to explain complex situations.

The two female college graduates chosen to support are domestic help’ children who live in the basti with their families. These two graduates are adults, 22 and 20 years old, and are cognizant of the aims of this research. They have been trained to closely understand the details of each variable in the schedule and its dimensions. Throughout the research fieldwork, all COVID-19 regulations have been strictly followed, adhering to the region’ safety protocols and government guidelines. In-person data collection was conducted maintaining a safe distance from research participants. Masks and sanitisers were used.

The interview data was inductively coded, where themes and concepts emerged from the data itself. The codes were arranged non-hierarchically allowing importance and specificity to each code. This technique very much aligns with the conceptual framework of IBPA that calls for simplicity and flexibility while acknowledging the importance of each dimension. In this manner, emerging themes are presented in the findings section.

Limitations

* Limiting a systems level overview, Anganwadi workers could not be interviewed or observed due to their poor office attendance and limited visits to the research location. NGO representatives could not be interviewed or observed due to their irregular and unplanned visits to the research location.

* Most husbands of the research participants were either busy throughout the days in search of employment or were not available most of the time, limiting their voices in this inquiry. The participants themselves were apprehensive at times to discuss familial and social issues fearing stigma.

* It would have been insightful to have interviewed or observed the participants employers to gain their perspectives and perceptions towards their employees.

Demographic Profile

The average age of the research participants is 34. The most common job of the participants is domestic help. A couple of them also work as cooks and tailors. Most of them are mothers to
Several participants work as domestic help which involves contact with household surfaces, utensils, clothes and so on, making it difficult to maintain absolute distance while undertaking their duties. As discussed earlier, females usually earn less than males in the informal labour market as they are employed in low paying jobs than males. The decrease in the proportion of the income of the husbands of the research participants is more than the decrease in the proportion of the income of the research participants. On average, males are earning INR 3000 less after the pandemic whereas females are earning INR 1700 lesser compared to pre-pandemic conditions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Undoubtedly, the economic impact of the pandemic on informal labour is multifold. The very first concern expressed by participants when discussing the effects of COVID-19 is regarding finances. It is to be emphasized that absolutely none of the research participants and their husbands have any agreement or contract with their employers, which is the typical characteristic feature of informal employment.

These losses have been incurred owing to market shutdowns, closing of businesses and employers’ hesitation to re-employ domestic workers. A few exceptional cases are of four families whose income rose. These are instances of employers’ financial help which is a rise in income to aid in the pandemic times.

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Women’ jobs have become a safety net, especially amidst a pandemic when jobs of males engaged as construction workers or daily labourers have been hard hit owing to COVID-19 restrictions. However, the barriers of caste and socio-economic status make it difficult for the participants to seek or receive financial help from their employers with ease.

‘My employers are employers. We can never be friends in the real sense, it will always be a hierarchical relationship,’ said a participant (21-years-old) who is a domestic help. Another participant who is also a domestic help (41-years-old) said, ‘It doesn’t matter how we are treated by our employers, good or bad. We need to work in order to survive and nothing else matters’. Literally, 27 participants expressed that caste-based discrimination is a reality they live with. Quoting instances of ill-treatment at the workplace, they seem to have accepted how they are treated by their employers or other actors in the society as they are born into categorized backward castes. They seem to be aware that it is only within their caste communities that they are welcome and that their voices hold some value. However, it is crucial to note that the participants live in a patriarchal setup that limits their liberty.

Sometimes, employers have also provided extra money in addition to salary during the initial months of lockdown in 2020. Participants reported that lack of empathy and support from their employers has made them feel abandoned as most women working as domestic help interact with their employers on such frequent basis often sharing personal conversations – good, bad, and ugly. Despite sharing-friendly exchanges, it is essential to understand that caste and several forms of privilege and discrimination expand far and wide regardless of cordial employee and employer relations. The pandemic has only further widened the gap between informal workers and formal workers, pushing the former into deeper financial loss with a rocky path to recovery. This also implies a widening gap between the haves and have nots or the higher castes and backward castes are under the pressure of clearing substantial debts, with the average debt amounting to around INR 2 lakh. Some of these loans were taken to cope with COVID-19 effects and importantly, most of these loans have been taken either from neighbours, relatives, or employers. These loans were not taken from formal banks as it only makes the participants feel higher pressure of interest repay and fear of losing existing assets. The purpose of these loans ranges from paying for institutional delivery charges, other hospital charges, school fees for younger children, expenses to conduct a marriage or death ceremony.

Support and aid from the government and civil society actors have been sporadic. 93 per cent of participants reported receiving INR 1500 once in 2020 along with 15 kilograms of rice under the government’ ration scheme reported receiving less than 15 kilograms of rice and a few also reported receiving neither rice nor any monetary compensation. The government
ration benefits are unevenly spread with migrants who travel back and forth often to their hometowns and cities, losing access to ration as there is no portable ration card facility to receive rations in multiple locations. Approximately, half of the participants felt that there is a difference in the implementation of government schemes when comparing 2020 and 2021. The COVID-19 second wave has been devastating in 2021, but it is also when the government's in-kind or monetary compensation has been lower than 2020 in this basti of the participants reported receiving help such as rice grain, cooking oil, tamarind pulp and other cooking materials from regional political parties in 2020 when they had conducted visits to assess the impact of COVID-19 in the region. However, when investigated, participants explained that the basti overall did not receive such help apart from those few houses that have been visited.

The Anganwadi, which is a childcare centre established in every village of India as a part of the Indian government' Integrated Child Development Services in 1975, aims to combat child hunger, malnutrition and mobilise communities towards improved health. The perception towards the Anganwadi in charge of this region is predominantly negative. Participants feel a lack of support, communication, and compensation. Most participants reported that they do not wish to attend meetings convened by the Anganwadi due to time constraints and due to their lack of trust in the Anganwadi’s services. A negligible number of participants reported that the Anganwadi has helped them by providing food grain. Several participants reported that they don’t see the Anganwadi functioning appropriately. In the words of a participant (35 years old), ‘There seems to be a lazy attitude towards serving the community’ A Tata-Cornell Institute for Agriculture and Nutrition (TCI, 2021) study found that at least 72 per cent of the 155 households in their sample lost access to the Anganwadi’s services during the pandemic. An unequal burden on women has increased due to the lack of access to Anganwadi services which are an important source of cooked meals and nutrition to women and children.

It is understood and examined that almost all the Anganwadis in India are overwhelmed with a heavy list of duties and these front-line workers are imposed with regular office duties, child immunization responsibilities, community health care, several mandatory workshops to attend and so on. All Anganwadis are women-run, who also need to cater to their familial responsibilities. The gendered nature of Anganwadi work is less investigated, especially the larger implications of front-line workers who are all female, being involved in multiple forms of primary health care and education.

There is one actively working Non-governmental Organization (NGO) in the region. About 60 per cent of the participants reported that they prefer attending the NGO organized meetings on women’ political participation, decision making, children’ education and so on. It is
to be noted that the NGO has provided food grain and required cooking material to research participants who frequently attend these meetings. 23 per cent of the participants reported that they received help from NGOs. Not all participants are regular at these meetings and they haven’t received the grain. Through a self-organized group of women in the basti, a couple of participants borrowed money from their community’ micro-savings account when in dire need of food for the household.

The basti is indeed located in a metropolitan city, however, the access of the basti residents to essential help and services is limited owing to their poor financial conditions. Their reliance on subsidized or freely provided services by the government or the civil societies is high but as inferred from the findings, the needs of the residents are unmet. The pandemic has only compounded the participants’ existing domestic and social problems. It serves as a push for urban governance to re-examine their engagement with informal settlements.

The discussion on food and nutrition is central because, in a month, the participants’ average food expenses are at least one-fourth of the family’ income, alongside other expenses, such as rent, electricity, water, and so on. Given the COVID-19 scenario, the health and nutritional values of the family are compromised. Around 33 per cent of the participants explained that their families have changed their eating patterns, from consuming three meals a day before the pandemic to two meals a day after the pandemic hit the world. The change in eating patterns includes eliminating eggs, meat and other sources of protein. Consuming fewer amounts of lentils and vegetables or serving other family members but themselves seems like a regular event.

In India, food distribution at the household level is still guided by cultural norms where women serve themselves at the end despite being solely responsible to cook and managing the pantries. This is largely practised in the rural and semi-urban areas and/or poor communities where they are left with a meagre amount of leftover food. 58.6 per cent of children, 53.2 per cent of non-pregnant women and 50.4 per cent of pregnant women were found to be anaemic in 2016, as per the National Family Health Survey. India carries the highest burden of the disease despite having an anaemia control programme for 50 years (Yadavar, 2019). It was found in the TCI (2021) study that, due to lack of purchasing power and inflation, women halved the quantity of red lentils they prepared or prepared thinner lentil dishes to feed the family during the pandemic. Given the women’ already poor diet diversity, this adds to their and their children’ risk of micronutrient malnutrition. Undernourished girls eventually become mothers giving birth to undernourished children, continuing the intergenerational cycle of undernutrition.
Perceptions regarding the pandemic varied from COVID-19 being a very serious disease to being a simple cough and cold. Most participants understood COVID-19 to be an ‘antu vyadhi’ meaning a communicable disease. Responses to questions on the symptoms of COVID-19 were similar throughout the sample such as fever, cough, cold. While trying to understand vaccine acceptance in these communities, the researcher found that 73 per cent of the participants reported trust in vaccines while only 50 per cent of the participants reported that they are vaccinated against COVID-19. It is interesting to note that not all those who trust the vaccine have had access to it due to shortages, long queues and in general, inequitable distribution of vaccines. Distrust in vaccines stems from fear of being injected, misinformation about the side effects and misunderstanding about the effectiveness of the vaccine. Eight participants who did not trust the vaccine had to take the vaccine whenever available out of necessities such as the government’ mandate to be vaccinated to continue availing monthly ration or their employers’ mandate before re-employing them. Almost all participants visited their or their husband’ hometowns located far away from the city to either attend a death or a marriage ceremony. These visits were made amidst restrictions and the government asking people to stay at home. This goes to show the perceived dangers of COVID-19 and how sociocultural norms are not forgiving despite tough times. As discussed earlier, loans were also drawn for these travel purposes.

Much like anaemia, the phenomenon of being married very young is a never-ending cycle given the social norms. One participant (40 years old) who was married away when she was 12 years old, got her daughter (now 19 years old) married at the age of 15 to a much older man in his 30s. Despite multiple attempts by her neighbours to prevent this marriage, the participant went on to get her daughter married young. The daughter had delivered a baby during the pandemic. ‘I regret my decision to have married away my daughter so young since her husband is abusive and violent,’ said the participant. Another participant (41 years old) who was married when she was 12 years old to a much older man left her husband fearing abuse. She lives with her mother, financially supporting her sisters and their families. These micro-narratives are reflective of women’ resilience in adversity. Research participants have shown strength and courage to overcome their financial and social struggles, undeterred by systemic, structural and social challenges at every step in the way. With all family members living congested under the same roof amidst the pandemic, it has limited women’ social interaction. They are not only held responsible for the caretaking of their husbands, in-laws and children but also extended families. Being unable to pay electricity bills or recharge mobile phones and television sets has added to the overall frustration. The pandemic has kept several participants’ children away from schools, making it harder for their future educational goals. The lack of digital literacy and adequate
equipment to pursue online learning widened the gap between children of parents belonging to backward caste communities and children from privileged backgrounds.

About 30 per cent of the participants reported high levels of domestic violence in general, irrespective of the pandemic. When probed about the conditions leading to violence, participants emphasised that alcohol was the primary reason behind their husbands’ erratic and harmful behaviour. The participants couldn’t exactly distinguish between violence before and during the pandemic, pointing to the intensity of the violent conditions they endure regularly. Evidence from previous literature suggests that violence against women increases during and post disasters. A study on Indian women post-Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 found that intimate partner violence increased by 48 per cent from 2001 to 2015 indicating how the demographically vulnerable factors lead to violent conditions after a disaster (Krishnakumar et al., 2021). Similar findings were inferred from another study conducted on Sri Lankan women during the tsunami where women in tsunami-affected areas were vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse (Fisher, 2010). The study further noted that domestic violence continued beyond the tsunami period. It is noted that despite this and other such empirical research studies, there is a dearth of research related to domestic violence during pandemics in India. It can be understood from this research inquiry’ findings that dissecting violence inflicted on women during uncertain times requires a dynamic and iterative effort, adopting a sensitive yet multi-dimensional approach to research.

In terms of the women’s agency, which is an important constituent of women’s empowerment, the distinction between how their voices and mobility must have changed in any fashion pre and post the pandemic is blurry as it is too nascent to adjudge the same. Many definitions of agency reflect both an internal feeling of agency (sometimes defined as the ability to set goals, where the setting of goals reflects the intrinsic sense of agency) and the external actions of pursuing goals, which is the instrumental aspect of agency (Donald et al., 2020). It is highlighted that, to unravel multiplicities and hidden forms of women’ agency, the socio-economic and cultural context is crucial (Campbell et al., 2016).

There seem to be hints of where marginalized women’s trajectories might be headed, when inferring from an intersectional and ethnographic context. When discussing agency and mobility pre-COVID-19, most participants explained that they usually seek permission from their husbands and in-laws before deciding on any purchase for themselves or the household. The keyword to unpack is ‘permission’. While 40 per cent of the participants felt that it is reasonable to seek permission while making expensive (subjectively defined) purchases, most participants felt that the final word on their opinions and decisions lie in the hands of their
A more specific question was posed regarding where the participants see themselves in terms of how close, or far away, they are from their subjective definitions of ‘development’. A few examples of what ‘development’ or ‘progress’ means to them are – No debts, sufficient money to pay for children’s education, owning a house, living with good moral values, harmonious familial relations, and supportive husband. While at least half of the participants’ notions of development revolved around secure financial status, the other half felt that living a sincere and honest life with strong moral values is real development. COVID-19 has made them feel further away from their goals of ‘development’ with a major focus on financial losses and lack of familial support.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic has re-emphasized the need for a nuanced understanding of what entails rural vs urban and informal vs formal labour and their implications on gender equality. This research further aims to investigate how recognizing the identities and cultural contexts of backward caste communities are vital to their socio-economic upliftment. The many trials of being engaged in informal employment to render such communities multiply vulnerable as the conditions of their personal and professional lives are interlinked and complex. Gendered and intersectional lenses are the need of the hour. As deciphered, the mitigation of adverse short term and long-term effects of the pandemic require thoughtful rollout of benefit and welfare schemes. The marginalization of women domestic workers, when viewed from the intersectional approach, considering class, caste, region, age, gender and so on, provide rich context and detail required to improve their conditions. Since there is no formal legal or policy framework for women domestic workers in India, they are further prone to exploitation as their job security is based on verbal agreements with their employers. The invisibility of women’s contribution, in general to the economy but also within their own families, is a testament to their experiences of inequity and inequality. Targeted policy and development interventions by state governments along with context-sensitive implementation is the utmost required with a specific focus on women.
### Informal Labour Blues: Effects of Covid-19 and Beyond on Women

#### Sample table

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<th>Sl. No.</th>
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<th>His education</th>
<th>Her age at marriage</th>
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REFERENCES


Informal Labour Blues: Effects of Covid-19 and Beyond on Women


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Manuscript received on: December 31, 2021

Manuscript accepted on: July 15, 2022