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## Covid-19: From bad to worse for women workers

### **Context:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has destroyed millions of livelihoods and led to a sudden and large increase in poverty and a massive disruption of the labour market in India.

Women workers, in particular, have borne a disproportionate burden. As the country meets the challenge of the second wave of the pandemic, it is crucial to learn lessons from the first wave to chart the policy path ahead.

### **Relevance:**

GS-II: Social Justice (Issues Related to Women)

### **Mains Questions:**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, women had borne a disproportionate burden of the severe disruptions to life and the economy. Discuss. Suggest measures to address the issue. (15 marks)

### **Dimensions of the Article:**



1. A widening economic gap
2. Gender inequality in India:
3. Constraints in Female Labour Force Participation
4. Growing domestic work:
5. Way Forward

## A widening economic gap

- Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd. show that 61% of male workers were unaffected during the lockdown while only 19% of women experienced this kind of work security.
- Women have lost more jobs irrespective of the industry in which they were employed.
- Unlike men who had the option of moving into fallback employment arrangements like self-employment and daily wage work, women seemed to have far fewer options.
- 47% of employed women who had lost jobs during the lockdown, had not returned to work, while the number stood at only 7% for men.
- Nearly half of the women workers, irrespective of whether they were salaried, casual, or self-employed, withdrew from the workforce, as compared to only 11% of men.
- Even as new entrants to the workforce, women workers had poorer options compared to men. Women were more likely to enter as daily wage workers while men found avenues for self-employment. This leads to more precarious work and lower earnings as compared to men.

## Gender inequality in India:

- India has slipped from 112 to 140 amongst 156 countries in the 2021 WEF Global Gender Gap Report. Of the four pillars of the index, India suffered mainly in economic participation.
- Gender inequality subsists in the Indian economy as in other sectors like health, education and politics.
- The labour participation of women is 22 per cent in India, one of the lowest in the world (comparable countries have 50 per cent).
- The wage gap between men and women across the Indian economy is a marked feature in India.
- Despite the fact that the number of women has increased in jobs, still, they lag behind in the total percentage of jobs. The gender employment gap is substantial given that only 18% of working-age women are employed as compared to 75% of men (Pre-pandemic statistics).
- Reasons include a lack of good jobs, restrictive social norms, and the burden of household work.



## Constraints in Female Labour Force Participation

1. **Stereotyping in Society:** India's societal norms are such that women are expected to take the responsibility of family care and childcare. This stereotype is a critical barrier to women's labour force participation. Due to this, women are in constant conflict over-allotment of time for work and life is a war of attrition for them.
2. **Digital Divide:** In India in 2019, internet users were 67% male and 33% female, and this gap is even bigger in rural areas. This divide can become a barrier for women to access critical education, health, and financial services, or to achieve success in activities or sectors that are becoming more digitized.
3. **Technological Disruption:** Women hold most of the administrative and data-processing roles that artificial intelligence and other technologies threaten to usurp. As routine jobs become automated, the pressure on women will intensify and they will experience higher unemployment rates.
4. **Lack of Gender-Related Data:** Globally, major gaps in gendered data and the lack of trend data make it hard to monitor progress. In India, too, significant gaps in data on the girl child prevent a systematic longitudinal assessment of the lives of girls.
5. **Impact of Covid-19:** Owing to Covid-19, global female employment is 19% more at risk than male employment (ILO estimates). For India, several estimates show that, compared to men, women were 9.5% less likely to be employed in August 2020 compared to August 2019.

### Growing domestic work:

- With the lockdowns in place and almost everyone limited to the confines of their homes, household responsibilities have increased for women. There has been a massive increase in the burden of household work for women.
- The India Working Survey 2020 found that among employed men, the number of hours spent on paid work remained more or less unchanged after the pandemic. But for women, the number of hours spent in domestic work has increased manifold. This increase in household work came without any accompanying relief in the hours spent on paid work.
- This could lead to a situation where married women and women from larger households are less likely to return to work, suggesting that the burden of care may be a reason for poor employment recovery.

### Way Forward



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## Short term measures

- Expansion of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and also the introduction of an urban employment guarantee targeted at women should be considered.
- There should be coordinated efforts by states to facilitate the employment of women while also addressing immediate needs through the setting up of community kitchens, prioritising the opening of schools and anganwadi centres.
- The governments should consider a COVID-19 hardship allowance of at least Rs. 5,000 per month for six months for 2.5 million accredited social health activists and Anganwadi workers, most of whom are women.

## Long term measures

- The National Employment Policy, currently in the works, should systematically address the constraints around the participation of women's workforce, both with respect to the availability of work and household responsibilities.
- The government should come up with policies for sectors where women participation can be significant, both in current (healthcare, IT, education, agriculture) and emerging (artificial intelligence, blockchain) areas.
- The government should focus on increasing public investment in social infrastructure like health, education, child and elderly care. This can help bring women into the workforce not only by directly creating employment for them but also by alleviating some of their domestic work burdens.
- Given the close link between educational attainment and economic participation and the big drop in enrolment of girls in primary (93 per cent), secondary (62 per cent) and tertiary (29 per cent) education, relevant interventions like Skill India should develop programmes for girls/women and address the systemic issues.
- There is the need to embrace policies for inclusion that help women progress in career, with up-skilling and "return-to-career" schemes, flexi-work, special leave, wage parity, hybrid working models, and so on. A concerted effort across key sectors with a cultural focus on gender sensitivity instead of gender neutrality can help.

-Source: *The Hindu*