

## Examining the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on internal migrants in India

### 1. *Background and Rationale*

The COVID-19 pandemic has consumed and affected all parts of the world with varying degrees of challenges. The pandemic unleashed an unprecedented movement of internal migrants. On the 24th of March 2020, a stay-at-home order was issued for all Indians with just four hours of notice<sup>1</sup>. According to a stringency index developed at the University of Oxford, India had one of the strictest lockdowns (a score of 100)<sup>2</sup>. This order made several assumptions about the ability of individuals and families to forego incomes and did not take into consideration the enormity of the number of internal migrants in cities as well as the precarity of their work (Rajan, Sivakumar, and Srinivasan 2020). Internal migrants, especially those employed in informal work, were severely impacted.

Social protection in India is biased against mobile populations and favors those that are sedentary (Ahmed, 2019; Ahmed and Deshingkar, 2020). The government announced relief packages for many of those who were impacted by the loss of jobs and disruptions to their livelihood and access to food and shelter<sup>3</sup>; however, a lot of the vulnerable migrant population may not have readily available identity documents making it harder for them to access social security available through the government (Ahmed, 2019). Private employers may or may not have paid these workers while establishments remained closed.

The hurried implementation of the lockdown led to a substantial movement of inter-state and circular migrants leading up to a crisis that has been widely reported. While not all migrants returned home, many were forced to undertake perilous journeys as they lost their livelihoods overnight. In the absence of transportation options, many walked home (Pandey, 2020; Bhowmick, 2020)<sup>4</sup> Some estimates suggest that this number was nearly half a million. These migrants belonged to the poorest states of India and belonged to lower castes (Roy 2020).

Internal migrants make up a large chunk of the Indian population. The 2011 census estimated the number 454 million, accounting for 37.7 percent of the Indian population (Census of India 2011). For most, migration is a livelihood strategy, especially for rural households (Datta, 2020), but the benefits are unequal to those who partake in these decisions; the pandemic in India has further shone light on the precarity of the jobs that migrants undertake. Compounding these challenges are gender inequalities. About 70 per cent of the total number of internal migrants in the 2011 census were female (Census of India 2011). Although female migration in India can be mostly attributed to marriage and associated reasons, recent research has shown employment-related increase in migration of women (Ghatak, 2019). Women also sometimes accompany their male spouses who move for work and then look for jobs in their new destinations (Parida and Madheswaran, 2019). The chances of women finding employment increase with the increase in the duration of migration (Ibid). The effect of the pandemic through a gendered lens for migrant workers through a systematic study is so far unexplored (Rajan, Sivakumar, and Srinivasan 2020). Further, the intersectional dimensions of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis by gender, class, lifecourse, and other markers of disadvantage have not yet come to light (Kabeer, Razavi, and Rodgers

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<sup>1</sup> Modi Orders 3-Week Total Lockdown for All 1.3 Billion Indians, New York Times, March 24 2020

[<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/world/asia/india-coronavirus-lockdown.html>] (Accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> of February 2021)]

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker> (accessed on 18th March, 2021)

<sup>3</sup> India announces \$22.5 billion stimulus package to help those affected by the lockdown. CNBC, March 26 2020

[<https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/26/coronavirus-india-needs-a-support-package-larger-than-20-billion-dollars.html>] (Accessed on 9th February 2021)]

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52672764> (Accessed on 9th February 2021);

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/05/they-treat-us-like-stray-dogs-migrant-workers-flee-india-cities/#close> (Accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2021)

2021). As researchers have pointed out, women are not a homogenous or a static group and the use of a gendered lens without an intersectional lens is unhelpful as it does not address other structural factors that intersect to create many layers of disadvantage (Ryan and Ayadi, 2020).

### *Literature Review*

Since the beginning of the pandemic, several studies have been carried out to understand the gendered impact of COVID-19. Although we don't fully know the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and what changes we will have to deal with in its aftermath, there has been some understanding of challenges faced up until now. Some of the areas of study have included access to labor markets and the disproportionate burden of care work on women.

### Employment

One of the questions that research has sought to answer is the labor market impacts using a gendered lens. The impacts have not been uniform. For example, in the broader Asia-Pacific region, using Rapid Assessment Gender Surveys, researchers found that women on average, were more likely to experience a loss in working hours as well as more job losses compared to men. Women's higher propensity to be employed in sectors that are export-oriented, driven by tourism, and in hospitality adversely impacted their ability to be employed during lockdowns (Seck et al, 2021). Similarly, in Korea women experienced greater job losses than men. While the sectors women were employed in took a hit, this was also a result of the discrimination that women faced because of the widely held perception that women are required to provide care-work while men are better suited for employment due because of their role as breadwinners (Ham 2021; Kabeer, Razavi, and Rodgers, 2021). A contrasting but another interesting study that conducted surveys using phone interviews representative of the Delhi metropolitan area in India examined the impacts of the pandemic on access to labor markets for men and women and found that women's employment declines were not as large as those of men (Desai, Deshmukh, and Pramanik, 2021). A large number of women in the survey were self-employed, and this shielded them from large declines in employment. This is different from a previous study that only considered wage employment and found that caste differences were not as sharp as gender differences (Deshpande, 2020). The differences in the two studies reveals the importance of measuring the full range of women's work.

### Care work

For some time now, it has been acknowledged that unpaid care work provided by women in the absence of institutional support forms the backbone of economies (Power, 2020). However, the pandemic has exacerbated the disproportionate burden of care work that women undertake especially as lockdowns have affected the functioning of schools, daycare centers, and informal support provided by grandparents or other family members.

A study on informal workers in Delhi found that 51 per cent of workers with dependents found that their childcare burden had increased while 38 per cent workers reported an increase in care for the elderly. Among these workers women reported higher increases in household tasks such as cooking, and cleaning compared to men (WIEGO, 2021). However, class doesn't necessarily protect women from this disproportionate burden. Research on sharing of household tasks during the pandemic among educated, middle-class families in South Asian countries also shows that women in heterosexual relationships disproportionately bore the burden of household work in the absence of paid domestic help (Kaur and Desai, 2021).

In the United States, millions of women were forced to reduce their paid work hours and many others have had to leave employment due to school closures and in the absence of childcare provisions (Collins et al, 2020;

Mooi-Recci and Risman, 2021). In a nationally representative survey of the United States in April 2020, researchers found that remote working widened the already existing gender disparities (Mooi-Recci and Risman, 2021).

## 2. *Research Objective and Questions*

The overall objective of this research is to bring to light the gender differentiated impact of Covid-19 on migrant workers in India to inform the emerging scholarship and the debates on Covid-19 recovery policies.

The specific objectives are a) to assess the gendered economic impact on migrant labour as mediated through the access to labour market; b) to examine the barriers faced by migrant labour in accessing social security benefits; and c) to understand the decision-making process and the experience of returning to villages and back to cities.

To meet these objectives, this research will answer the following questions.

1. Gendered economic impacts of the pandemic: (What was the impact of lockdown on work opportunities and incomes of migrants from different social class, caste, gender, and geographical locations? Did this experience differ for male and female workers? Did these experiences differ for single male migrants and couples?)
2. Physical mobility and experience of the pandemic: (Was the physical mobility of women affected more than men's during the various lockdowns and after? How was return migration undertaken? Mode of transportation and experiences during the journey? How were migrants received in their home communities? How did the migrants and their households deal with the loss in income?)
3. Decision to stay or return to their native homes: (What are the factors that played a role in the decisions of migrants to return to their place of origin? Do migrants who chose to return differ from those who chose to stay-in-place have different personal, familial, and social resources? What was the role of social protection measures and bureaucratic hurdles to accessing these benefits in shaping the decision of migrants to stay versus leave? What are the future plans of the migrants? Have some migrants have undertaken a second journey in search of work?)

## 3. *Research Design and Methodology*

### 3.1 . Methods

Given the unpredictability of travel, ethical considerations, and safety concerns for carrying out in-person research, ~40 semi-structured interviews will be carried out by calling participants on their cellphones. Recent experience of research during the pandemic from all over the world (and especially in developing countries) has shown that phone interviews are an effective way to reach respondents. I am also currently based out of the International Development Research Center (IDRC) where data collected on informal workers' experiences during the pandemic has been made available to me, specifically data collected by the Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). I will combine the data from the interviews with the survey results to use a mixed-methodology approach to answer my research questions.

### 3.2 . Analysis

The phone interviews will be transcribed by a research assistant based out of India. Data available through interviews will be coded using NVivo. I will use the available secondary data to present a broader trend for informal workers using structural equation modeling in STATA to study the direct and indirect effects to the research questions I pose.

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