



## **Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Socio-Economic Vulnerable Groups**

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It seems that the COVID-19 has not only attacked persons with weak immunity, but it has also exposed the weakness and vulnerabilities of country's socio-economic structure. India is experiencing the rapid rate of increase in cases which is enough to expose the reality of health infrastructure and vulnerability of Indian population. Initially, the metropolitan cities saw the fast growth in number of cases, which was obvious because of the easy connectivity to the world, foreign nature of pandemic and even the spread of infection is "correlated with population density at a meta level (that is, urban versus rural areas) simply because a denser environment increases the number of possible contacts" (Altaf, 2020). But later, it easily spread to sub-urban and rural areas.

COVID-19 cannot be solely blamed for the worsening economic situation as growth rate had been declining and unemployment rate had been increasing even before the pandemic (ILO, 2020). According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the youth unemployment increased by more than double from 2012 to 2018. COVID pandemic started with the major health crisis but the sudden imposition of lockdown by the central government made it into a major humanitarian and economic crisis. This lockdown led to the closure of factories and agricultural works, which made large number of workers unemployed. Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) estimates that average unemployment increased to 23% by April 7, 2020. The most vulnerable groups of workers, who lost the jobs, are informal workers (which constitute of around 90% of workforce) and self-employed. Informal workers are mainly employed in manufacturing, construction and services. The majority of these live near construction sites and near factories without adequate accommodation and basic amenities which make them more vulnerable to get infected by COVID. Due to all these reasons, the State's policy ignorance and uncertainty about future employment status, just after the imposition of lockdown, the large number of migrants (in some cases with family) started walking back to native place. This indicates towards the fragile relationship of the state, employer and workers in case of informal employments. Since large number of migrants are from the states like UP and Bihar, so these states would have excess of unemployed workers after reverse migration. These states are likely to face bigger issues, because the situation "will put pressure on agricultural land while household incomes as remittance from urban areas dry up" (ILO, 2020).

The most vulnerable groups are Women and SCs & STs people.



### **Impact on Women:**

Puskar et.al, highlighted that the remittances of the families of migrants reduced due to unemployment, which may force women of those families to sell their assets, like livestock, or to take usurious loan from moneylenders.

Women in the rural areas are the main source of workforce in farm sector, particularly in the village of large male out-migrants. They may also lose jobs, because these villages would have now excess of unemployed labour force with reverse migration.

According to the World Trade Organisation (WTO, 2020), women work mainly in MSMEs and informal sectors. Since these are the worst hit sectors, definitely the large women workforce would lose jobs. It has been observed that women workforce are less preferable than the male workforce. So, in the time of recovery, it can be assumed that women will be hired lately, it means situation will remain worst for women for longer period as compared to male.

Evidence shows that there is gender gaps in terms of access to nutrition, particularly in socio-economic disadvantageous groups. In this distress situation of job loss and lack of availability of nutritious food, women can become more vulnerable and the gender gaps in terms of access to nutrition may further increase.

Globally, 70% of the healthcare workforce are women and they are mainly in lower-status roles, like ASHA health workers in India (Miyamoto, 2020). There are 1 lakh ASHA workers and 25 lakh anganwadi workers in India, all are women (Bhandare, 2020). Due to lack of healthcare facilities and staff, they are over working at the frontline with additional duties of tracing infected persons and educating people about the prevention measures (Agarwal, 2020). Initially, it was reported that they were working without proper safety measures. Their works lead them to exposure to infected people and put them in greater risk.

The situation is more critical in rural areas than urban areas, for example, in Bihar, there are greater shortages of health centres and medical staff in rural areas than the urban areas, also the number of ASHA workers are less than the required number (Kumar and Kumar, 2020). These reasons force ASHAs to over-work.

According to ILO, in 2017-18, around 66% of domestic workers were women. So, another vulnerable group is domestic workers, particularly women, who are unprotected workers.

Puskar et al predicted that “frustration within households during challenging times could lead to an increase in domestic violence”, because evidence shows that women feel more independent and face less domestic violence when their husband migrates.



## Impact on SCs and STs

Various studies show that in the recent period large numbers of informal workers lost their jobs, mainly those who were in low status jobs and who had less educational qualifications. The general category migrants, due to better educational qualification, are more employed in higher status jobs and SCs & STs are employed more in low status jobs due to less educational qualification (Singh, 2020). That is why, it can be assumed that more workers from SCs and STs would have lost jobs. The employment dropped by 20% points for SCs and 14% points for STs, but for upper caste it dropped by only 7% points (Deshpande and Ramachandran, 2020). The data of recent return migrants of Madhya Pradesh and a recent study on Bihar support the above analysis. Around 59% of reverse migrants in MP belong to SCs and STs, and only 2.7% of reverse migrants are from the general category (Ghatwai, 2020). The survey of AzimPremji University reported that nearly 58% of STs and SCs workers lost employment in Bihar (Mansoor, 2020).

The construction sector is a sector among the sectors which are severely hit by the crisis. Around 28.70% and 23.70% of workers in the construction sector belong to SCs and STs, respectively (EPW Engage, 2020), they together constitute more than 52% of the workforce in the construction sector. Thus, SCs and STs workforces of the construction sector would have been adversely impacted in this crisis by greater degree.

In this crisis, most of the works are being done online, classes of children are being conducted online. Only 10% of SC households have access to the Internet, which is much lower than upper caste households (Deshpande and Ramachandran, 2020). As per the data of IHDS-2, 2011-12, there is big gap between the illiteracy rate of upper caste women and SCs women, this is also true in case of male. These kind of disparities between caste groups are making more difficult for SCs and STs to get engage with online mode of working and education.

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