

## **No help for helping hands – Impact of COVID-19 on female domestic workers in India**

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COVID-19 has earned itself a popular tag of “pandemic of inequality.” This title rightly fits the virus as its effects vary according to the inequalities in place. The poor are suffering more; marginalized communities are more at risk while developed countries (except for few) can cope up better due to higher resources. This makes it clear that the effect of COVID-19 on different population groups is not uniform. Domestic workers are one such population group that has faced severe challenges due to COVID-19. This article examines the case of the impact of COVID-19 on female domestic workers in India.

### **Domestic labor in India**

According to the ILO, around 3 million women in India are employed in domestic labor. However, this is a severe underestimation of the actual number of domestic laborers which is estimated to be in between 20 million to 80 million, thus suggesting that the exact number of female domestic laborers is also relatively high (*source: ILO, 2020*). The domestic labor group in India represents extreme marginalization which is defined by economic class, caste, urban migration etc. Women under this group face multiple disadvantages on account of socio-cultural conditions. Most of the labor laws in India do not apply to domestic laborers. Thus, the worsened impact of COVID-19 on female domestic workers is a combined effect of the absence of protective laws and socio-economic conditions.



**Millions of female domestic workers were pushed into extreme poverty during COVID-19.**

**PHOTO BY DIPLEENA SAIKIA**

## **Impact of COVID-19**

Despite the predictability of this problem, it was not appropriately tackled at the macro-level, which resulted in several losses for this group.

Most of the domestic workers in India are migrants, and they (especially lower-income migrants) often do not own housing at the location they migrate to. Bearing rent of housing thus became a serious problem for domestic workers.

Another major crisis was the lack of food security caused by economic losses among the domestic labor class. Although the government announced the distribution of basic ration for low-income households, like many other workers in the Indian informal sector, women in domestic labor workforce face the lack of documentation (such as ration cards, residency proof etc.). This made many domestic laborers incapable of availing the benefits of specific government schemes started as a response to COVID-19.

## **Reasons for crisis**

The biggest reason for this effect on women in the domestic labor force was the lack of any specific government sanctions for the target group. An indefinite nationwide lockdown was announced on March 23, 2020. This lockdown imposed several mobility and economic restrictions, making domestic laborers incapable of continuing their employment. Several Resident Welfare Associations imposed restrictions on the entry of domestic laborers into housing societies during the lockdown and even after that. Women in domestic labor workforce also faced stigma on account of being potential virus carriers, making their situation even more difficult.

## **Measures to alleviate the crisis**

We can argue that the significant reason for crisis borne by female domestic laborers is the absence of specific state intervention. The approach to handle this crisis must be two-fold - immediate relief measures and long-term solutions. The immediate actions can include more inclusive economic packages for low-income groups, desensitization of community to remove the stigma against domestic workers, and the creation of alternate employment opportunities. The long-term solutions involve revamping of the informal sector by strengthening labor laws pertaining to this sector.