

Webinar Proceedings

No. 5

Women, Work and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Paving the Path Forward

Webinar Series on the Socio-Economic Impact of the Covid Pandemic



BAHÁ'Í CHAIR
FOR STUDIES IN
DEVELOPMENT

DEVI AHILYA VISHWAVEDYALAYA

Women, Work and the Covid-19 Pandemic:
Paving the Path Forward

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The Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development is an endowed Chair at Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore established to promote interdisciplinary research and scholarship on social and economic development based on a vision that regards enduring prosperity as an outcome of material and spiritual progress. As part of its mandate, the Chair organizes spaces for dialogue, exchange of ideas and discussion on themes related to development with various stakeholders in the field of development including academicians, civil society organizations and representatives of government organizations.

In response to the Covid 19 pandemic, the Chair has organized a series of webinars on the social and economic impact of the pandemic on India's most vulnerable and marginalized populations in rural and urban areas. These webinars bring together some of India's best-known social scientists and development practitioners to share insights on the challenges facing these vulnerable groups and the steps that can be taken at the level of policy making and practice to address these challenges.

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Profile of the Speakers

Dr. Vibhuti Patel is a retired Professor, *Advanced Centre for Women's Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai*. She has authored/co-authored 12 books; edited/co-edited 9 books and contributed over 100 papers as chapters in various books edited by others. She has also authored/co-authored 34 research monographs and reports.

Dr. Govind Kelkar is the Chairperson of *Gender Impact Studies Center (GISC) at Impact and Policy Research Institute, New Delhi*. She has worked extensively on gender relations in rural Asia and has contributed numerous scholarly articles with a focus on political economy of land rights, gender and energy in Asia. She has also authored/co-authored 16 books including *Women's Asset Ownership and Reduction in Gender-based Violence*.

Dr. Paromita Sen is the Research Manager at *SEWA Bharat*. Her research focuses on the intersection of gender and social movements, specifically issues of women's physical security and violence against women.

Dr. Ashmita Gupta is an assistant professor at *Asian Development Research Institute*, Patna. Her primary areas of interest are empirical microeconomics, labor, development, gender, public finance and international trade.



Background Note

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly worsened the challenges women face in participating in the economy and in public life on an equal basis with men. This worsening of gender disparities, which has been observed worldwide, has been particularly acute in India. The Impact of Covid-19 on Women – a policy brief released by the United Nations – observes that the pandemic will likely reverse many of the gains made in achieving gender equality in the past decades. The Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya University is organizing a webinar on the theme *'Women, Work and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Paving the Path Forward'* to explore the gender dimension of the economic impact of the pandemic and the policy interventions that can be pursued by state and non-state actors in responding to this challenge.

Even before the onset of the pandemic, there were many obstacles impeding the economic participation of women. Legal, cultural and social barriers limited women's ownership, access, and control over productive assets which have a significant bearing on their ability to generate income, have access to credit and cope and respond to shocks. In the labour market, women earn less than men and their jobs are less

secure. A 2019 Oxfam report found that in India women earn 34 percent below men. Nearly 90 percent of women workers in India are occupied in low paying and highly precarious jobs in the informal sector such as domestic workers, street vendors, construction workers, home-based producers, rag pickers, artisans or agricultural laborers with little or no access to social protections. Further, gender-based occupational segregation limits the scope of work easily accessible to women and the possibilities for professional advancement. The fact that women face almost the entire burden of unpaid domestic care work only compounds to their economic challenges.

The onset of the pandemic exacerbated these pre-existing disparities. The loss of jobs on account of the pandemic has hit women much harder than men. Sectors which are disproportionately represented by women have witnessed massive job losses. In many cases women have been compelled to drop out of the workforce during the pandemic, driven by a significant increase in unpaid domestic care work. According to a recent survey, the pandemic increased the time women spend on family responsibilities by 30 percent in India, causing increased stress at home and contributing to a sharp rise in gender-based violence.

As the loss of livelihoods has pushed households into greater precarity, the range of the discriminatory attitudes women face have come into sharper relief. When the household loses its source of income, the assets of the women – such as jewelry and small animals– are the first to be sold. Increasing

malnutrition and hunger among girls and women during the pandemic are perhaps the most disturbing manifestation of this discrimination. In households dominated by patriarchal traditions, girls and women are often the ones to eat last - and the least. With the loss of income, families cut down on sources of proteins, fats and various micro-nutrients and the worst hit by this are women. Yet another way the pandemic is taking a toll on women is the sharp rise in child marriages and the consequent early pregnancies caused by households being pushed deeper into poverty.

Given this scenario, policy makers will need to ensure that measures to address the pandemic and its economic fallout respond to these gender-specific challenges. Urgent interventions will be needed, for example, to ensure the physical and psychological well-being of women by ensuring access to social protections; reducing their burden of unpaid care; ensuring greater financial and digital inclusion for women and addressing attitudinal biases that legitimize, condone or disguise inequalities. In addition, the learning that has accrued from those initiatives for the economic empowerment of women that have borne encouraging results will need to be more broadly shared and applied.

Finally, a word is in order about how this principle is conceived and brought to bear on development policies and programs. Gender equality has been shown to contribute positively to almost all areas of development. Yet, this should not be allowed to

become the reason for championing it. As a principle, the equality between women and men has an intrinsic and not an instrumental value. It is a fundamental truth that pertains to our common humanity. Its basis is the belief that in those qualities, capacities and attributes that make human beings human, women and men are without distinction. Elevating the equality of the sexes to the level of a moral principle will ensure that it is pursued as an end in itself, without compromise on grounds of expediency, culture or tradition.

This webinar seeks to bring together economists, women's rights activists, and leaders from the field of development to deliberate on the impact of the pandemic on the economic and productive lives of women in India and of possible interventions that could reduce and reverse the widening gender disparities in relation to work.



Webinar Proceedings

The Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore organised a webinar on December 26, 2020 titled, *Women, Work and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Paving the Path Forward*, to bring together economists, women's rights activists, and leaders from the field of development to deliberate on the impact of the pandemic on the economic participation of women in India. In addition to bringing to light the widening disparities between women and men in the economic domain as a consequence of the pandemic, the webinar sought to explore interventions at the level of policy-making and civil society initiatives that held promise for reducing and countering this alarming reversal.

This was the fifth in a series of webinars organised by the Chair to shed light on the social and economic impact of the pandemic on India's most vulnerable populations. While the disparity faced by women remained a cross-cutting issue that featured in almost every discussion on development in the context of the pandemic, its salience and complexity especially in the context of economic relations called for a separate webinar to deliberate on this theme. The speakers of the webinar were Prof. Vibhuti Patel, Former

Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai; Prof. Govind Kelkar, Chairperson, Gender Impact Studies Centre (GISC), IMPRI, New Delhi; Dr. Paromita Sen, Research Director, SEWA Bharat and Dr. Ashmita Gupta, Visiting Faculty, Asian Development Research Institute, Patna.

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In her opening remarks, Prof. Vibhuti Patel painted a broad picture of the state of women's participation in the Indian economy, especially in the context of the Covid pandemic. Referring to recent statistics she mentioned that the participation of women in the workforce in India which was among the lowest in developing countries had come down from 34 percent in 2006 to 24.8 percent in 2020 (UNCG, 2020). In the meantime, the global average of the participation of women in the economy was 45 percent of the workforce. Further, a mere 6 percent of the women in the workforce are employed in the formal sector which promises a degree of job security, coverage by labour laws, rules and norms regulating work conditions and the prevention of sexual harassment. She mentioned that even these women fortunate enough to gain employment in the formal sector have to juggle their career with various other responsibilities such as unpaid domestic care work. Thus in their work in the formal sector they faced unfair competition from men who had none of their other responsibilities

and could gain a competitive advantage by being able to dedicate all their time to their work. As for the remaining women in the workforce, they formed part of the informal sector without job security, with minimal pay (often below the government stipulated minimum average), working in hazardous conditions without safety standards and often exposed to sexual harassment. All these difficulties and limitations that women faced, she commented, were sharply intensified during the pandemic and the consequent lockdown.

Prof. Patel observed that these discriminations that women face are held in place by the economic structures of society. The most obvious form this discrimination takes is in the unequal pay that women receive for the same or similar work carried out by a man – this regardless of whether they work in the formal or informal sector. She further stressed that the phenomena of the segmentation of the labour market and the prevalence of strong gender biases in the economy, not only limit the choices of jobs open to women but also restrict them to the less prestigious “low paying, dead-end jobs and monotonous employment” replete with drudgery.

This phenomenon was made possible by what Prof. Patel called the pervasive ‘invisibilization’ of a woman’s work in the Indian economy. Their contributions have been made invisible by not being

acknowledged or valued at the level of public policies, in state legislations, or within political, intellectual or cultural discourse. Much of the non-remunerative work that women do – running households, caring for children, the sick and the elderly, and carrying out unpaid economic work in farms or home businesses – is not recognized as ‘work’ but rather is seen as the duty of women. These forms of work are not remunerated and therefore are not valued.

Similarly, she drew attention to the persistent neglect of women in important state legislations such as, for example, the recent legislations seeking to reform agriculture and to institute new labour laws. In both cases, she felt, the issues that concern women and their wellbeing were not addressed. This despite the fact that the plight of women in the labour force was in urgent need of attention and women contribute an overwhelming share of those who work in Indian agriculture. However, due to this systemic indifference to their particular challenges and contributions, not only are women’s issues not accorded the importance they deserve, women themselves are not ‘seen’ in these sectors of the economy. Thus, she pointed out, although women constitute a large percentage of the farmers of India, they are not recognized by legislations and laws as farmers. The farmer is always considered to be a man. Due to this, women farmers are deprived of the compensation provided by the State at the time of crop losses.

She further mentioned that the prevalence of gender stereotypes places limits on what the State and its institutions believe women can achieve. Thus, in the case of training programs run by the State to train women in income generating skills, they are usually provided training in a few low-skill professions such as screen printing and tailoring. Instead, Prof. Patel observed that if women were training in the skills needed by industries, their scope for professional advancement would be greatly enhanced.

Another dimension of this neglect, is the absence of gender-segregated statistics that would help pinpoint how developmental challenges affect women in particular. For example, while it is known that millions of Indian workers in urban settings migrated back to their villages and towns during the lockdown in the wake of the pandemic, there is no data on how many of these migrants were women. Since ‘women migrants’ are not identified as a distinct category, their particular challenges and issues are never properly understood and addressed.

Prof. Patel also referred to gender norms in society which, in the context of the pandemic, has led to the ‘feminization of poverty’. Explaining what she means by this, she said that at a time of economic crisis such as the one caused by the Covid pandemic when there is a high level of unemployment among men, women are discouraged from competing with men for work in adherence to existing gender stereotypes that portray

the man as the primary bread winner and the woman as a supplementary earner and a homemaker.

One of the areas where she called for change was in cultural norms that determine who carries out unpaid care work in the home. Citing statistics, she mentioned that during the pandemic the unpaid care work carried out by women had increased by more than three times. Such work in the family needs to be redistributed with boys and men. She also suggested that the situation could be addressed by monetizing care work. This would not only attract more people to this kind of work, it would also bestow greater respectability upon it.

The next speaker at the webinar, Prof. Govind Kelkar, focused her remarks on the fast-growing segment of the gig economy which had grown exponentially after the onset of the pandemic and which provided women with various work opportunities. However, according to her, discrimination against women has continued in this sector as well in the form of women being assigned low-skilled or unskilled work, they being given unequal pay for the same or similar work done by men, their lack of job security and the increasing incidence of sexual harassment in various forms. “The gender dynamics of traditional economies have continued in the gig economy”, she observed.

Picking up on the theme of the invisibility of women in the workforce, Prof. Kelkar mentioned that the lack

of accounting of women's work reduces women to "a liability in the home and in society". They were considered "non-entities in economic transactions and policy consultations." Not only is the unpaid work that women do not valued or even acknowledged, she observed that due to the prevalence of gender stereotypes women get pulled away by the family from participating in paid work since their primary duty is seen to be caring for the household. The implications of this are more than just the lowered economic prospects of women. It takes away her dignity by not respecting her contribution and by preventing her from developing her inherent capacities through work. What was needed, Prof. Kelkar opined, was for women to have "unmediated rights to knowledge, assets and property" – an access that is not mediated through the male head of the household.

On the impact of the pandemic on the well-being of women, Prof. Kelkar noted that the two worst outcomes of the pandemic for women are increased care work and a sharp rise in domestic violence. With regard to care work, she cautioned that while we do need to recognize this kind of labour as 'work', we must be careful not to glorify it. The drudgery that is entails must be recognized for its demeaning and dehumanizing effects. In this context, she mentioned that the mechanization of care work has been a welcome development freeing women to do more meaningful things.

Enduring change, she felt, would result when both men and women in the household take responsibility for and share domestic work. In the absence of this attitude that everyone in the household irrespective of gender is equally responsible for house work, girls and women are not only unfairly burdened with excess work they also become more vulnerable to the threat of violence. As Prof. Kelkar explained, one of the consequences of such gender stereotyping is that it provides the rationale to justify domestic violence. Men feel entitled to being served by the women while the women who are the primary caregivers of the home are perceived to be worthy of punishment if they fall short of their duties. This became starkly evident during the pandemic when as Prof. Kelkar mentioned, women faced violence in their homes for reasons such as “the food not being cooked in time or not being cooked well” or “parents, families or in-laws not being taken care of.”

Dr. Paromita Sen, who was the next speaker of the program, drew on her work with the development organization SEWA Bharat to discuss proven strategies for empowering women at the grassroots. She emphasized the importance of working directly with local communities and nurturing leaders among women in the communities to become agents of change. SEWA’s experience with raising such agents of change provided testimony to its effectiveness.

These local women leaders, who are rooted in their communities, have an understanding of the conditions in their society and are able to reach out to the local administration at the village or the ward in a city to initiate much-needed changes. Emphasizing the great amount of work carried out by these community leaders during the pandemic, she said that “these are women who campaign and figure out what goes into the relief packages; get hospitals opened up; ensure TB medication does not stop and that level of local change although not having lasting effect has a very tangible impact on the women’s lives”.

Another way in which SEWA empowers women to take charge of their own economic and social development is through the formation of collectives. These collectives, she explained, were meant to help women achieve self-reliance. Access to these collectives allowed women in the village or neighbourhood to tap into the accumulated resources of the collective which included not only economic resources but also information. As she put it, “because you are already part of the collective, ...if a couple of women in the group figured out something, then the information would be disseminated very quickly”. The collective also enables them to draw upon their collective strength in achieving tasks which might be too overwhelming for an individual to undertake. Further, the training and support of collectives has improved the women’s position in the family and in the community.

The last speaker on the panel, Dr. Ashmita Gupta reflected on some of the structural barriers that impede the participation of women in the Indian economy. The conditions and terms of work within the formal sector in India, according to her, are determined by the underlying imperative of the economy to achieve ever higher levels of growth. The nature of economic growth in India, she observed, requires firms to be competitive by lowering their costs through means such as reducing staff salaries or expenses on human resources and increasing work hours. This form of growth, which relies on open or tacit pressure on the work force to over-work under sub-optimal conditions to gain a competitive edge in the global market, works to the detriment of women.

Indian women, she said, are already disproportionately burdened with care work given the influence of strong patriarchal cultural stereotypes. In such conditions, for a working woman to maintain a steady job under regular timings itself becomes a challenge. The ability to work long hours sacrificing time with the family which would be acceptable for a man becomes almost impossible for a woman. The family support that the man could rely on under such conditions would be very difficult for a woman to achieve. Thus, not only would most women prefer not to take on challenging assignments that would demand most of their time, companies also have been shown to prefer not to hire women knowing that they will have commitments beyond the work to attend to. In such conditions women are more likely to choose less

formal forms of work that allows them more flexibility.

She also highlighted how policies intended to ensure the security of women can unintentionally become an obstacle in the women's greater participation in the economy. She gave the example of the law that prevents women from working at nights in order to protect them from violence that unintentionally became a barrier preventing women from entering professions that require night work. A more sensitive policy would focus on creating safe and secure work conditions for women.

Quoting from studies that have been carried out on the impact of negative income shocks on low-income families in India, she mentioned that two common steps that were taken as a result of these shocks were to pull the girl child out of school and have women enter the labour force. This was particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the steps that could improve the quality of women's participation in the economy in India, she felt, was to take steps to prevent the drop out of girls from schools. She also identified greater government investment in public education as a step that would contribute to this long-term process.

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Throughout the webinar, speakers and participants deliberated on the dynamics of a social movement that

would engender long-lasting change in terms of manifesting the principle of the equality of women and men to ever higher degrees both in collective consciousness and in the structures of society. On the one hand it was acknowledged that communities and groups throughout the world were seeking to advance towards greater gender justice in their societies. There thus needed to be greater openness to learning from best practices in creating gender-sensitive cultural norms and work conditions from the diverse endeavours being carried out around the world.

On the other hand, within communities and groups, the efforts towards enhancing the economic participation of women needed to involve and embrace everyone. Such efforts had the best chances of succeeding when both women and men were conscious of the need for gender justice and when action towards bringing about change proceeded along avenues that instilled a spirit of collaboration and collective effort between all the members of a community or a family. When this spirit of collaborative effort manifested itself in actions that brought about small and tangible changes with visible benefits for the entire community, it instilled faith that change was possible and created greater motivation in the community to persevere on the path. Thus, transformation towards greater participation of women in the economy came to be seen not as an outcome of a struggle for power between opposing

interests but rather as a collective movement seeking the betterment of all.



Clockwise from left to right: Dr. Vibhuti Patel; Dr. Govind Kelkar; Dr. Ashmita Gupta and Dr. Paromita Sen.



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Devi Ahilya Vishwavidhyalaya, Indore
NAAC Accredited 'A+' Grade University
Nalanda Campus, RNT Marg, Indore.

Tel: 0731-2527080
E-mail: info@bahaichairdvv.org
Website: www.bahaichairdvv.org