

Review Article

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Pandemic and Livelihood Means of Farm Women

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ABSTRACT

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Out of 17 Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations has set out Empowerment of Women and Gender inequality as an important goal. It demands large scale pro-active and science based interventions as gender inequality in all dimensions of human development. As per Census 2011, 50 per cent among men workers and 65 per cent among women workers are involved in agriculture either as cultivators or as agricultural labourers. Even after significant contributions women farmers at the back drop are more vulnerable to major risks in agriculture, which includes climatic hazards and market risks. The Covid-19 pandemic has unleashed havoc worldwide, and India continues to be within the line of fire. The pandemic is not only a challenge for global health systems but also a test for our human spirit especially women. However, the farm women entrepreneurs faced the pandemic situation bravely and have aggressively adapted their small/medium scale enterprise to resist the impact of pandemic. The pandemic has the potential to reduce gender gap in entrepreneurship by altering structural business dynamics. Women farmers come forward to set up new ventures for sustaining their livelihood, viz., transition of apparel designing to school uniform making, business to manufacturing of safety equipments (masks, gloves, PPE kits), preparation of sanitizers etc. Women entrepreneurs acquired new/modified their skills from the existing, redesigned their process of manufacturing and accelerated the adoption of technology to combat the crisis. Despite the economic and social setbacks women have responded to the crisis rapidly.

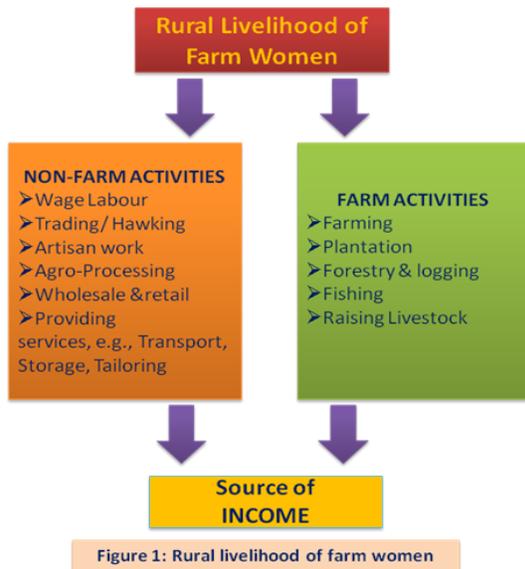
Introduction

Women are the backbone of the total agricultural workforce and constitute 48 percent of the total population in India. Agriculture is the prime source of women's livelihood constitutes 78 percent of economically active in agriculture as compared to 63 percent of men. More than 75 percent of rural women belong to the families

of small and marginal farmers. Female main workers constitute 16.2 percent of the entire main workers of 31.2 percent, out of which 34.6 percent of female main workers are cultivators, 43.6 percent are agricultural laborers, and 4.6 percent are engaged in allied sectors such as livestock, forestry, and fishery. Approximately 2/3rd to 11/2 of the farm manual labor is done by women. Women in India play a predominant role in

agriculture and food provisioning and subsistence agricultural activities.

Women are the drivers of developed as well as developing economies may it be rural or urban. They play a crucial role in shaping families, societies and are actively involved in on-farm and off-farm activities. Their engagement in those activities diversifies family livelihood. Rural-indigenous women are active agents of socio-economic change and environmental conservation, but more often than not, they are confined to the roles of a homemaker, caregiver, farmer and consumer. They play a pivotal role in ensuring food security by participating in all levels of the process, from production to distribution to utilization. Farm women are at the core of the production system, managing and enhancing agriculture, food security, natural resources and eradicating rural poverty.



Before the pandemic situation, 1.3 billion, or 44.3% of women worldwide were in employment, compared to 2 billion, or 70 percent, of men recent outbreak, increased the risk of the life of women and curtailed day to day activities, even though they are major producers of food in terms of value, volume

and hours worked in agriculture and allied activities which are ecologically and economically critical.

The complications and higher risk in pandemic situations have snatched away the normal livelihood of women. Households and especially livelihood strategies were stopped due to the lockdown imposed by the government. In developing countries such as India, women have larger contributions to rural economies but the outbreak posed a serious threat to economic and social challenges during young women's work and business activity and exposes them to an increased risk of exploitation and abuse.

For the last 22 years, the global poverty situation had been declining but COVID-19 disrupted economies, jobs and resulted in the loss of livelihood particularly for women. The pandemic will contribute to the worsening of gender poverty gaps. As per UNDP, 206 million women were living in poverty before COVID-19 but the latest adjusted forecast depicts that nearly 232 million women around the globe will be living in poverty in 2030. With plummeting economic activity, women are particularly susceptible to loss of livelihoods. Globally, 58 percent of employed women work in informal employment, and estimates suggest that during the first month of the pandemic, informal workers globally lost an average of 60 percent of their income. Impacts on education and employment have long-lasting consequences that, if unaddressed, will reverse hard-won gains in gender equality.

The pandemic is not only a challenge for global health systems but also a test for our human spirit especially women. Women-headed households will have magnified burdens as they are forced to manage increased responsibilities in caring for the ill while continuing to provide family income in

places where women's employment opportunities and mobility may be even more limited than before the crisis. Women face gaps in access to information, access to financial and social support due to social distancing, and lockdown measures. The consequences won't disappear when the pandemic subsides: women are likely to experience long-term setbacks in workforce participation and income. The outcome of the pandemic situation has created new ways of problems faced mostly by every woman in India- the fear of job, harassment by family-frequent domestic fights, decrease in income and lack of savings are now the toughest battles that women are fighting. Women have already migrated to other jobs to meet their family requirements; they even work as laborers or sell agri-produce to sustain their livelihood. *What does it take to wage a war with a virus?* As it turns out, it needs empathy, planning, flawless execution, and the ability to work hard. Amid the deluge of negativity and fear, women are working against odds and with several constraints. It's been one of the toughest battles to fight and this is a war that women are winning.

Impacts of the pandemic

The Pandemic has led to a negative impact on economic, social, health care, and unpaid care work. Millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty due to continuous loss of livelihood. Trade restrictions and confinement measures have prevented farmers from accessing markets; buying inputs, selling produce, and harvesting crops. Millions of agricultural workers- waged and self-employed experiencing income losses, migrant workers are even more vulnerable to the pandemic due to their living conditions. Due to restricted movement and social isolation measures, gender-based violence has increased exponentially. Three categories that have a disturbing impact on farm women are as follows:

Economic impacts: There is a big shift in world economic markets and the share market has witnessed crashes every day. Talking of market and supply chains, the impact has already crippled the agriculture sector. Women's economic & productive lives has affected disproportionately. The food security and nutrition of millions of women are under threat particularly small-scale women farmers and indigenous people being hardest hit. The situation of employment of women (70 %) in developing economies worsened due to restrictions. Compounded economic impacts are felt especially by women and girls who are generally earning less, saving less, and holding insecure jobs or living on the brink of poverty. Without the means to earn an income during lockdowns, the breadwinners are unable to feed themselves as well as their families.

Health care Impact: Evidence from past epidemics and the existing evidence around the impact of COVID-19 suggest that the disruption of essential health services puts women and girls at risk of decreased access to services as resources are diverted from routine health services, and other reproductive health services. The limited availability of essential health services, including reproductive health services, is going to be detrimental. Women are increasingly at greater risk of domestic violence, disruptions to their healthcare services, mental stress and anxiety. The health of women generally is adversely impacted through the reallocation of resources and priorities.

Unpaid care work: The crisis has amplified the impacts on this sector. School closures have put additional strain and demand for women in household chores. Care for older persons is additionally a critical need within the face of COVID-19. Women health workers battling for patients in COVID-19 situations are poorly paid community health

workers are also responsible for looking after their household members. It is even nearly impossible to maintain distance and avoid exposure to the virus when someone from home gets infected in lower-income households with more dependants, where the demand for care tends to be greater.

As per the statistics released by the National Commission for Women (NCW) India in early April 2020 there has been 100 % increase in complaints related to violence against women after the nationwide lockdown was imposed in March 2020 (Source: The Hindu, April 29.03.2020). During the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, the scientist of All India Coordinated Research Project on Women in Agriculture conducted two studies on 'Assessing Psychological Distress and Coping strategies among Women during Covid-19'. The findings relating to dimensions of psychological distress indicated that 'emotional stability' found to be average in 65% of the respondents, high in 30% and low in 5% of the population. Overall adjustment to the pandemic was found to be average in majority (48%) of the respondents, high in 43.5% and low in 8.5% of the respondents. With regard to total psychological distress 29.5% of respondents had scored more and they had lower levels of distress, 31.5% average and 39% showed high distress. In case of approaching coping strategy, 49% showed high, 38% average and 13% low logical analysis of coping. With regard to positive appraisal of the respondents, 49% exhibited high, 38% average, 13% low. In seeking guidance and support, majority of them (51%) were in average category, 20% high, and 29% were under low category. With regard to avoidance type coping strategy, 47.5% showed average cognitive avoidance, 37% high and 15.5% low, respectively. In acceptance dimension 73% showed high, 25% average and 2% had low acceptance type of coping strategy.

Mitigation and adoption of various livelihood options by rural women

During the pandemic situation, the most important question arises especially for rural pockets of India, *whether farmers can work from home?* Women farmers fighting for survival have neither other options nor a back-up plan and it is them and their skills we are relying on. Farming has always been a women's game in India, as per the 2010-2011 Indian Agriculture Census-75% of rural women work on farms. Women are silent and unacknowledged backbone working tirelessly in inhospitable conditions battling for survival. They are bound to work on the field in these hostile and lockdown situations. The disproportionate impact of the Pandemic on women in the rural and agricultural sectors has created a loss in livelihood. The Prime Minister's addresses hailed the hard work of farmers for the country and announced several new schemes and free rations under '*PM Garib Kalyan Yojana*'. Immediate interventions have never too early or late for policymakers, fund raisers, researchers, service providers to rebuild and prepare for further crisis.

Entrepreneurship Development during and after the crisis

According to the recent data analyzed by McKinsey Global Institute, women are more susceptible to pandemic-related economic effects due to already existing gender inequalities. The data and trends from unemployment surveys in the USA and India, where gender-disaggregated data out there, the study estimates that female job loss rates owing to COVID-19 are about 1.8 times more than that of male job loss rates globally, at 5.7% versus 3.1%, respectively. Also 90% of the women entrepreneurs have reported an unusual decrease in their sales revenues. Women entrepreneurs mostly work in sectors

such as food, arts, recreation, and retail which are the worst-affected by the pandemic. The data in the second-quarter mainly from April to June 2020, employment numbers in India indicate that the number of women who lost jobs was higher than that of their male counterparts.

Challenges for women

Disruptions to economic participation:

Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are particularly feeling these impacts, with businesses having to shut down and experiencing loss of revenue, demand, and cash flow, as well as supply chain shortages.

Threats to access to assets and resources:

Significant gaps between men's and women's access to productive resources needed to run farms and businesses during the pandemic situation.

Impacts on physical and emotional health:

The economic pressures and quarantine measures are also increasing their vulnerability to gender-based violence during the crisis, with reports of such violence increasing 48% in India.

Initiatives by women counterparts

Through continued hard work, innovation, and product diversification, many women entrepreneurs are facing certain barriers and side by side taking control of their livelihoods slowly, some of them are mentioned below:

Meeting the shortfall in masks, sanitizers, and protective equipment

Groups across the country worked dedicatedly to form up the shortfall of masks and personal protective equipment (PPE).

In Odisha, for instance, poor rural women who were earlier engaged in stitching school uniforms are sewing masks instead. Over the past couple of weeks, these women have produced about 1 million cotton masks, helping equip police personnel and doctors, while earning something for themselves.

Running community kitchens, feeding the affected:

With a huge amount of informal workers losing their livelihoods and food supply chains getting disrupted, a viable model of over 10,000 community kitchens across the country was set up by SHGs to feed the stranded workers, laborers, and poor people.

Farm-to-home model:

It is helpful particularly in urban and non-farming households; women should use their entrepreneurial skills and engage in the direct sales of their agricultural produce to the doorstep of the consumers, with the assistance of a couple of wholesalers. Further, vendors who are supported by farmer producer companies or similar farmer groups are ready to provide direct services to a bigger number of households as consumers are ready to directly place orders through social media applications like WhatsApp and Facebook.

Small poultry and dairy farmers:

Women farmers may find more value in collaborating and trading as a group in the small poultry and dairy farm sector.

Socio-economic stimulus package announced under *Atmanirbhar Bharat*: Accelerating financial inclusion/ reforms for agriculture and food processing sectors

Rs.10 lakh collateral-free loans for SHGs (self-help groups).

Cash transfer of ₹ 500 per month for three months to women Jan Dhan account-holders.

Rs 500 crore for Operation Green to prevent distress sale leading to a reduction in the price of perishable fruits and vegetables at the farm level.

Rs. 10,000 crore Scheme for the formalization of Micro Food Enterprises (MFE) under 'Vocal for Local with Global outreach' vision.

Rs.1 lakh crore Agri Infrastructures Fund for development of agriculture infrastructure projects at farm gate and aggregation points (such as cooperative societies and farm producer organizations).

Support to fishermen/women under *Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana*. Under this scheme, Rs 11,000 crore and Rs 9,000 crore will be spent for developing infrastructure (such as fishing harbours, cold chain, markets)

Steps taken by the government of Odisha

To mitigate the long-term nutritional challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent reverse migration, the State Government is now laying emphasis on the creation of Nutri-gardens in 750 panchayats. Odisha government has decided to create 5 lakh Nutri-Gardens in the state. An extension of the existing 'My Beneficial Garden' Scheme under Odisha Livelihood Mission (OLM), the new initiative has been converged with MGNREGS to boost the rural economy and improve livelihood. The Government has set a target of covering five lakh households during 2020-21. The target was doubled to mitigate the adverse impact of the lockdown.

Learning from the hardship-adapting for future

The farm women entrepreneurs faced the pandemic situation bravely and have aggressively adapted their small/medium scale enterprise to resist the impact of

pandemic. The pandemic has the potential to reduce gender gap in entrepreneurship by altering structural business dynamics. Characteristics like faster adaptation, less capital intensive and service oriented will possibly help. Women farmers come forward to set up new ventures for sustaining their livelihood, for e.g., transition of apparel designing to school uniform making, business to manufacturing of safety equipments (masks, gloves, PPE kits), preparation of sanitizers etc. Women entrepreneurs acquired new/modified their skills from the existing, redesigned their process of manufacturing and accelerated the adoption of technology to combat the crisis. Despite the economic and social setbacks women have responded to the crisis rapidly.

Suggestions and recommendations

Bringing MGNREGA like scheme to urban areas for unemployed.

E-linking household-related enterprises of women to larger markets should be done so that women are able to bargain at the vertical level.

To encourage investment and boost food security, inputs such as seeds and fertilizers to be directly provided to women farmers at subsidized rates.

Mobile technology can effectively be used for training and cash transfers to address barriers that women farmers face during pandemic.

State governments should make efforts to strengthen the approach towards agriculture by upscale or uplift FPOs.

A special permit (e-pass) has been made mandatory for the transportation of agricultural produce.

Various reforms like land leasing, contract farming, and private agricultural markets to be implemented at this point to offer a lift to the agriculture sector and to push its growth.

Increased and targeted help towards major livestock and small poultry farmers, due to

their pandemic-related input supply and market-access problems are urgent.

Farmers must have continued access to markets. This will be a mixture of private markets and government procurement.

In conclusion these years, for the agricultural sector, women were slowly ventured into farming activities rather than staying busy in traditional roles but due to pandemic, reverse migration may take away this opportunity. In the absence of male members, female members had traditionally worked as labour, learned farming practices, such as land leasing and purchase and use of seeds, pesticides and fertilizers, decisions on informal and formal credit. Pandemic will reverse accomplishments on women's empowerment and slow down development for a few decades. Women's upward mobility would be severely restricted in comparison to men. To tackle the situation policies should be gender-sensitive rather than gender blind. There should be a need to remodel the inequities of unpaid care work into a new, inclusive care economy that works for everyone.

During this pandemic situation women serve mankind as the strongest warriors in this pandemic situation. Developing countries like India has a more fragile economic and social fabric and the situation created enough obstacles for common people to sustain a normal socio-economic status. It is the time for global solidarity and support, and we must recognize this opportunity and start to build back and tackle the current situation with great ambition and urgency. In terms of the economic point of view, strengthening the supply chains and participation of women in the formal labour market, building more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies, economic policies for an immediate response & long-term recovery need to be designed and implemented with a gender lens.

The consequences won't disappear when the pandemic subsides: women are likely to experience long-term setbacks in workforce participation and income. The fallout is going to be most severe for the foremost vulnerable farm women, migrant workers, refugees, marginalized racial and ethnic groups, single-parent households, and youth. Those who have recently escaped extreme poverty will likely fall back to it. It is these times of disruption that demand us to keep calm and look at the brighter side while innovating and rethinking on our feet. Thus, there should be a need to mitigate the risks and focus on new and improved opportunities to overcome current and future challenges.

“For ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ it's important to take women along! The focus should be on the role of women in reviving the economy and making India self-reliant”

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