

# Reflecting on Gendered Effect of COVID-19 in the Backdrop of PLFS 2018-19 in India

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## Abstract

*The paper tries to assess the status of women employment by analyzing the data from the recently released Government of India's Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2018-19 and also throws light on gendered effect on labour market during Corona times.*

Women constitute half of India's population<sup>1</sup> but comprise the most of the underutilized human resources. Even though the novel coronavirus is a health pandemic it has left no dimension of our life untouched whether that is economic, political, cultural, social or spiritual. The disparities like rural-urban, socio-economic, male-female have become more apparent during this time of the crisis and seem to have exacerbated. Though the coronavirus has affected people irrespective of their economic class, it has impacted males and females differently. It becomes evident from the findings of various researches that the COVID-19 related death rate among males has been higher than that among the females irrespective of the country, whether it is China, US or Italy. This was the case with earlier epidemics like SARs too in 2003[1]. Contrary to this, a study done in India shows that 'women may have higher COVID-19 death risk than men' as the fatality rate (CFR) for females is 3.3% and 2.9 % for males[2]. If viewed carefully, this pandemic has been affecting women disproportionately in terms of higher risk of deaths and it is likely to impact differently in terms of economic prospects in short and medium term and post COVID-19 period. Loss of jobs, unpaid care and domestic work are on the rise over the last few months. Whatever little progress India had been making towards gender equality might get rolled back and Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5: Gender Equality) might remain a distant dream unless state

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<sup>1</sup> 48.53% of population as per 2011 Census.

interventions are designed in an effective manner to provide ‘economic resilience’ to women. Therefore, it will be highly appropriate if we try to briefly view the pre-COVID -19 labour market scenario in India with a gender lens and then try to assess briefly the likely repercussion of the outbreak of Coronavirus. Recently released Periodic labour Force Survey(PLFS) 2018-19 data [3] covering the period July 2018 to June 2019 gives us a broad picture of Indian women’s place in the labour market.

## **Viewing Labour Market Scenario with Gender Lens during the coronavirus period**

Undeniably, for improving the economic and social wellbeing of women, as has been outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5), women must join the labour market and should make fuller use of their skills and qualifications. Greater economic participation of women can be a source of empowerment, inclusive growth and well-being on the one hand and provide several business benefits as women bring valuable skills, diversity of thought, utilize time efficiently and are more productive. Countries can reap several benefits by ensuring greater female labour force participation. For example, this can help India in realizing ‘demographic dividend’, this can help Japan too in checking negative impacts of declining fertility and population in the younger age cohorts and this will provide an alternative approach to Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development(OECD) countries to deal with the problem of ageing population [4].

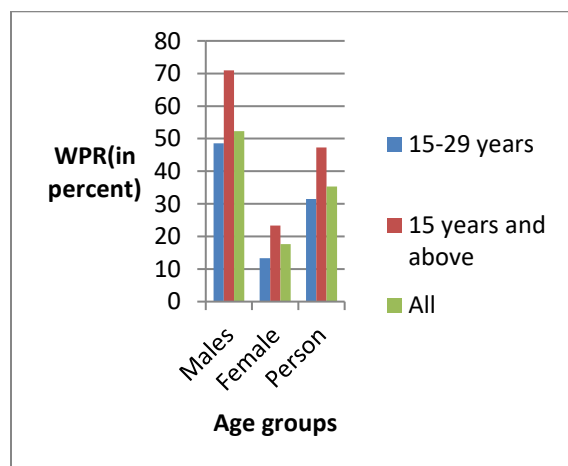
## **Relatively Low FLFPR and FWPR**

What is important to point out is that in developing countries like India, female work force and labour force participation rates lag behind the male specific rates as is shown in figures 1 and 2. This is true for younger age group (15-29 years) and also for those who are 15 years and above (the set of economically active population). As is evident from the figure, work population ratio (WPR) stood at 13.3% for young women as against 48.6% for young males. Similar is the case with educated females. The WPR for female graduates was 21.3 % in 2018-19 (as against 69.3% for males). It stood at 35.3% and 78.4% among post graduate females and males respectively. Among those with secondary level education just 17.2% women participated in work (as against 71% males). This can be attributed to various socio-economic and cultural reasons [4, 5]

The decline in the FLFPR and FWFPR is not a new phenomenon. It is largely a continuation of the downward trend observed over consecutive quinquennial surveys conducted by NSSO [i.e.61st (2004-05), 66th (2009-10) and 68th (2011-12)].

**Fig.1**

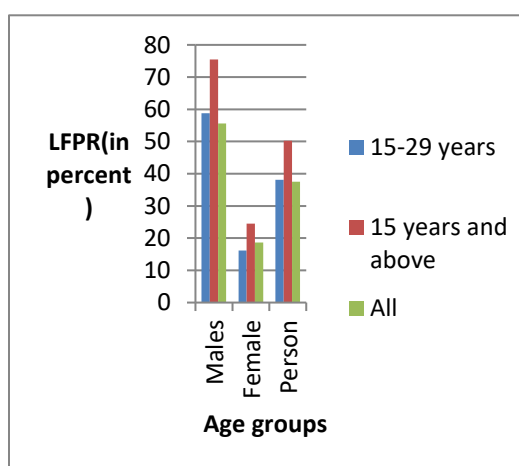
**WPR (in per cent) in usual status (ps+ss) during PLFS (2018-19)**



Source: PLFS 2018-19

**Fig.2**

**Labour force participation rates in usual status PLFS (2018-19)**



Source: PLFS 2018-19

**Note :** The National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India provides three different estimates of employment and unemployment based on different approaches / reference periods used to classify an individual’s activity status viz. Usual Status(US),Current Weekly Status(CWS) and Current Daily Status(CDS).Usual status approach with a reference period of 365 days preceding the date of survey. Usual status of a person comprises of his principal and subsidiary activity status (PS +SS).The activity status on which a person spent relatively long time (i.e. major time criterion ) during the 365 days preceding the date of survey is considered as the Usual Principal Status (UPS) of the person. A person whose UPS was determined on the basis of the major time criterion could have pursued some economic activity for a shorter time (not less than 30 days) throughout the reference year of 365 days preceding the date of survey for a minor period during the reference year. The status in which such economic activity was pursued was the subsidiary economic activity status (SS) of that person.

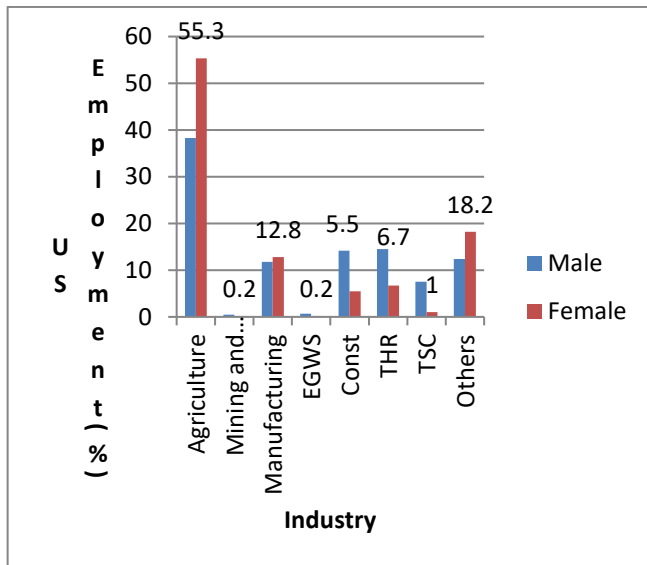
### **Women: “invisible and unrecognized backbone of agriculture”**

If we look at participation of women by industry division, it was highest in agriculture (55.3%), followed by other services (18.2%) and manufacturing (12.8%). It is interesting to point out that women are the “invisible and unrecognized backbone of agriculture”. This is mainly because of the reason that agriculture continues to be the mainstay of more than 50% of women despite the

declining trend in agriculture. Within this sector, women perform varied roles like that of agricultural laborers, managers of home steads, landowners etc. and also participate in agricultural operations related to livestock management, crop production etc. To add to it they do other unpaid household jobs (unlike their male counterparts) and unpaid work on family farms. Despite huge work burden, they are being discriminated at home and at other levels too: whether it is access to credit or other inputs or wages. It can also be noticed that around 18% women are employed in ‘other services’ segment which comprises work in female-dominated fields such as education and health care and personal services (see Fig 3).

**Fig. 3**

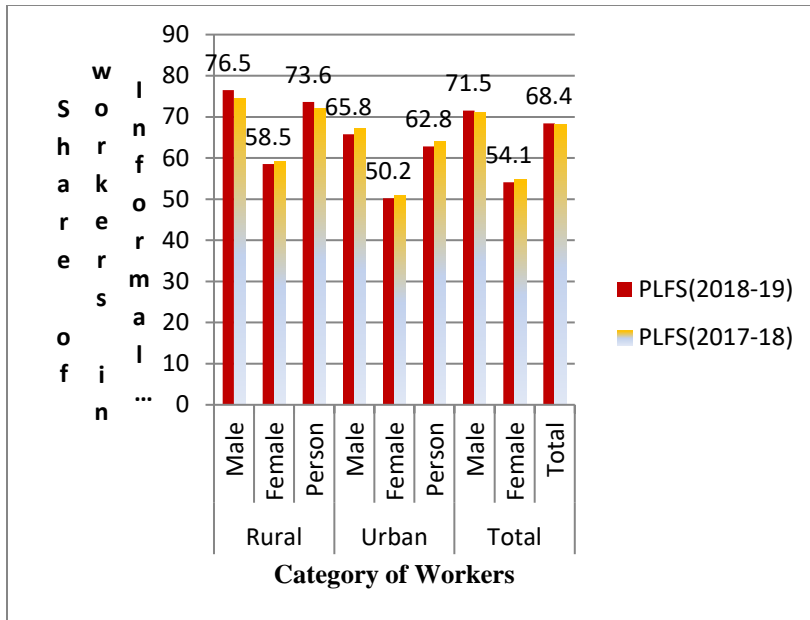
**Percentage Distribution of Workers in US (PS+SS) across three sectors During PLFS 2018-19**



Source: PLFS 2018-19

**Fig.4**

**Proportion of workers in US (PS+SS) in Informal sector Among Workers engaged in Non-Agriculture Sector during PLFS 2018-19 v/s 2017-18**



Source: PLFS 2018-19

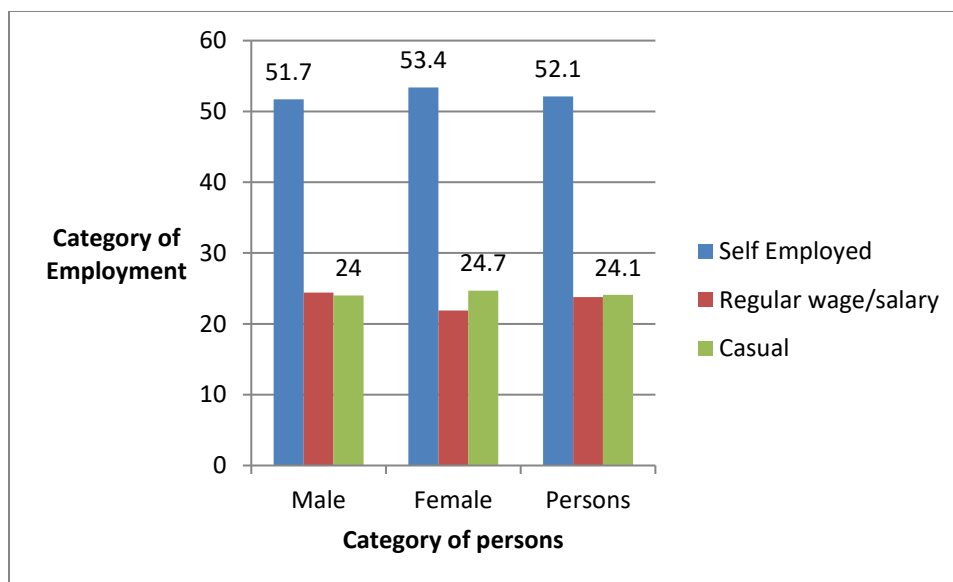
Even when women participate in labour market and are employed in manufacturing and services it does not mean, they are doing full time jobs with complete social security. As per PLFS 2018-19 (as shown in Fig 4 given above), more than 50% (54.1%) of women were employed in informal sector (v/s 71.5 % males).

### Growth of Informal Sector and Conditions of work

Another stark reality is that informal sector is the main source of livelihood: females 54.1% and males 71.5 %. In all, 68 % of workers were in the informal sector in 2018-19. Engagement of a large percentage of women in self-employment work (53.4%) followed by 25% in casual also presents a grim picture (see Figure 4). The three categories of work viz. self-employed, regular wage/salary and casual labour were engaging larger magnitude of labour in rural areas than in urban areas. The WPR in the rural areas is much higher than in the urban areas.

Fig.5

Percentage distribution of workers in usual status (ps+ss) by status in employment during PLFS 2018-19



Source: PLFS 2018-19

Employment of a large percentage of females in self-employment (53.4%) and casual work (24.7%) as depicted in Fig.5 is worrisome. It is the inability of worker to find gainful employment and being engaged in underemployment low productivity jobs. Another noticeable point is that casual unemployment is more prevalent in case of the two main socially disadvantaged groups viz. SCs (41.2%) and STs (30.5%) followed by OBC (22%). Therefore, the first two groups constitute most vulnerable social groups. More than 50% of STs (56.5%) and OBCs (55.8%) were self-employed. Only 38.5% of SC's were self-employed. Amongst regular/salaried workers, 66.5% had no formal job contract with their employer, almost 54% got no paid leave and 50 % worked without social security benefit. The social security benefits were defined as provident fund and pension, gratuity, and health care and maternity benefits for the PLFS.

Another disheartening point is that even when men and women work for the same hours, women get less wages as shown in Table 1 and Figure 6 given below). Average earnings on monthly basis were highest in case of regular workers followed by self-employed category. The figure clearly shows that regular workers are the best paid amongst the three categories. Casual labour engaged in works other than public works earns the lowest wages. It is this category which is worst affected because of economic slowdown.

**Table 1**

**Average Earnings (in Rs) from employment for all the three categories of workers (April-June)2019**

	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	Persons
Self-Employment*	9543	4335	8743	18001	6755	16353	11674	4919	10648
Regular Wages**	13794	8578	12667	19557	15661	18657	17161	12851	16196
Casual***	8910	5970	8370	11040	7320	10560	9300	6120	8730

Source: PLFS 2018-19

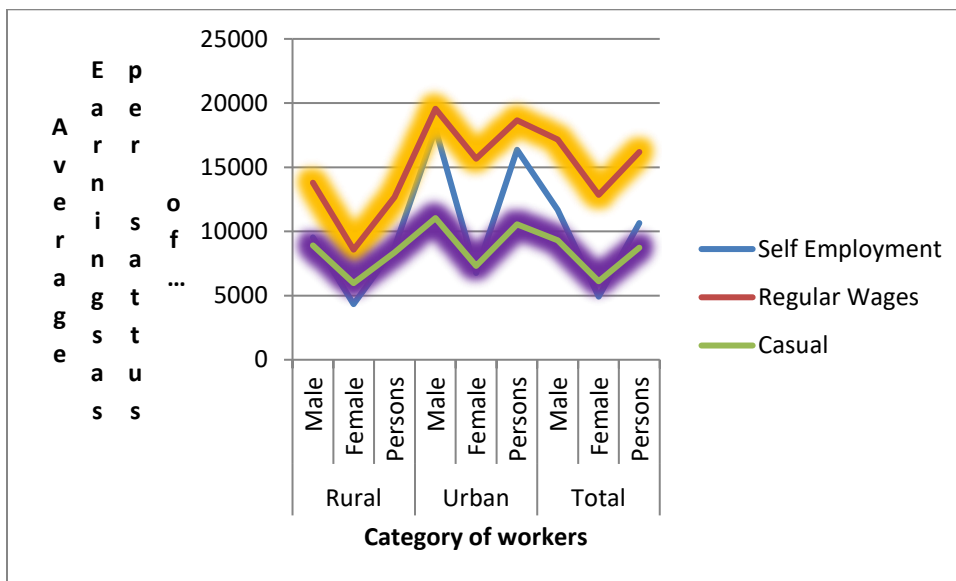
**Note :** 1. \*Average gross earnings (in Rs.) during the last 30 days from self-employment work in current weekly status during the survey period 2018-19

2.\*\*Average wage/ salary earnings (in Rs) during the preceding calendar month by the regular wage/ salaried employees in current weekly status during the survey period 2018-19

3.\*\*\* Average monthly earnings (in Rs.) have been calculated for casual labour engaged in works other than Public works during the survey period 2018-19

**Fig. 6**

**Average Earnings (in Rs)from employment for all the three categories of workers**



Source: PLFS 2018-19

### Work Burden on Females v/s males

Though women earn less as compared to their male counterparts yet their contribution to unpaid household work is enormous. As per one estimate (UNDP), women in India spent relatively more

time on non-marketing activities i.e. 65% of their time which covers household maintenance (cleaning, laundry, meal preparation and clean up), management and shopping for household, care for children, the sick, the elderly and the disabled in own household, and community services. On the other hand, men spent just 8% of their time in these activities and their major time (92%) was spent on income earning activities. Further, the burdens of domestic responsibilities on women seem to have increased [4].

## **Women and Work during CORONAVIRUS Period**

The overall economic impact of the pandemic triggered ‘worst recession’ (since independence) and its impact on women livelihood seems to be devastating as the crisis began from the services sector - unlike the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 which was production-centric - which gives employment to a large number of women. With the nationwide lockdown, when everybody got stuck at home, domestic chores were conducted by the residents themselves. Very aptly this COVID-19 has been termed as the “job-killer of the century”<sup>2</sup>. A large majority of the income earning jobs which women were engaged in were lost. Women working as own account workers or helpers in household enterprises, regular wage/salaried workers without job security or casual laborers with low wages and no safety net are the worst affected because of economic slowdown resulting from the Covid-19 outbreak. Even when India is moving towards the phases of unlocking the chances of reviving their employment are still meager. Women working in the organized sector (for example in education and health or IT sectors) may be less affected as they can work remotely and deliver the services through telecommuting but a beautician or a hairdresser or a waitress even when employed in the organized sector definitely, cannot do that. Therefore, women in the lower rungs of the services sector are hit the hardest.

Women are under dual burden as along with the household work, they have to look after, guide and train children to handle devices like laptops and software to ensure ‘learning continuity’ during periods of disruption of face-to face teaching. The mounting pressure of unpaid household work, care work, elderly care shows the challenges for women which can add to their physical, mental

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<sup>2</sup> The PM of Fiji has termed this pandemic as the job killer. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/11/job-killer-of-the-century-economies-of-pacific-islands-face-collapse-over-covid-19>



and emotional stress and affect their overall wellbeing. Losing jobs, managing houses with meager savings or no savings, with limited access to bank credit are other hurdles.

## **Policy Implications**

It is quite obvious from the PLFS 2018-19 that many women in India are still in vulnerable position in the labour market and their quality of jobs is low. The deterioration in quality of work can be captured by knowing the extent of informalisation of an economy. The mere facts that the majority of them are employed in the informal sector wherein they work as casual laborers with no job security and safety nets or in regular jobs without job contracts or paid leave or social security in place or in agriculture with low or no access to credit and earn less as compared to the male workers are enough to narrate the fact that their vulnerability is on the rise. Secondly as Mitra [6] pointed out in the early 1990s, the greater concentration of labour force in the low productivity service activities may lead to “the phenomenon of discouraged dropouts from the labour force because prolonged or persistent work in low productivity activities reflect mainly the bleak prospects of graduating to a high productivity job”. Having low or no earnings and savings during this pandemic time implies the lack of food and nutritional security which can lead to increase in morbidity and mortality. The female marginalization during this coronavirus time can have serious repercussions on the extent of poverty in terms of consumption expenditure, calorie intake, health care and education and income distribution. It is, therefore, very essential that the food and nutritional security should be provided to the poor and to the informal sector women workers on priority basis. COVID 19 has been once again reminding us that “the role assigned to each sex must again be made more equal -with men as well as women accepting their dual function of work and family” [7]. Besides, reprioritization of public expenditure in favor of social care infrastructure is a must. It is the time for the country to use this crisis as an opportunity to reorient the poverty alleviation strategies by making them more gender focused. Designing of interventions should be done in such a manner that these provide economic resilience to women. Higher GDI value (at 0.829 in 2018) as compared to HDI value ( of 0.647) has been pointing towards the declining gender disparities in India but the spread of the COVID-19 and second wave of infections give rise to the apprehension that the gains made over the past two decades may be done away with by this contagious pandemic and take us back to the pre-existing inequalities. Though the fiscal stimulus packages and emergency measures to address public health gaps are in place in India to mitigate

the impact of the pandemic, the regular monitoring and evaluation of these programmes will be a must to see what works and what does not. It has been very rightly pointed out by the United Nations that “It is crucial that all national responses place women and girls - their inclusion, representation, rights, social and economic outcomes, equality and protection - at their Centre if they are to have the necessary impacts”[8]. As OECD [9] says that GDP in India could rise by 8% if the female/male ratio of workers went up by 10%. Therefore, there is an urgent need for such interventions to raise the role of women in the economy through ensuring higher FWFPR by providing an enabling and supportive environment in the form of educational and health facilities, formal child care facilities, tax incentives, flexible working hours etc. In addition, socio-cultural norms need to be evolved through social transformation which can be achieved by improved information diffusion.

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