

Disaster and Intersectional Vulnerabilities: Loss of Livelihoods among Female Domestic Workers during Covid-19 and its Communalisation

NEHA NIMBLE

Abstract

Drawing from the lived experiences of female domestic workers (henceforth: FDW), this paper explores the impact of COVID-19 and its communalisation in India on their livelihoods. By doing a critical intersectional assessment of feminisation of vulnerability, the paper attempts to understand how relations of gender, class and religion impinge on female domestic workers' experiences as their employment is terminated in response to lockdown enforced by COVID-19. An intersectional analysis of the role of communalisation of COVID-19 in India also moves scholarship within disaster studies beyond men versus women dichotomy and builds a case for studying women at intersection of their multiple identities.

Pandemics occur in unequal and gendered societies and determine unequal impacts for different social groups. The findings indicate that relations of gender, religion and class construct and are constructed by disaster as well as socio-economic devaluation of domestic work. FDWs are experiencing termination of job; decreased food security and wellbeing; severed inter-personal and inter-community relations; increased exposure to domestic violence; push for marriage and motherhood; and decreased status within household and community. Despite having crossed the stereotyped barriers on their mobility in market space to do paid work outside their homes, Muslim FDWs are finding themselves being pushed back into their homes by their employers as well as the state authorities. By identifying and highlighting FDWs' adaptive livelihood strategies in the face of disaster, the paper also challenges the notion that women's identities are fixed as victims and helps see them also as agents with capacities.

1. Introduction

...Like you fear for your life, we also fear for ours...
But we cannot separate life from livelihoods...
-Rukhsana¹, an FDW.

It has been well established that disasters are not only natural and man-made hazardous events, but also complex social phenomena (Enarson and Morrow 1). Pre-disaster socio-economic contexts have a direct bearing on the differential consequences of disasters on different groups of the affected society. Responding to its extensive damaging impact,

Coronavirus pandemic has been declared a disaster by government of India. By exploring the ways in which Female Domestic Workers (FDWs) experience the loss of their livelihoods due to lockdown enforced by Coronavirus outbreak, this paper argues that women experience disasters at intersection of their multiple identities.

Using intersectionality lens, women's lived experiences of loss of livelihoods due to COVID-19 are analysed within feminist phenomenological framework. The paper also draws from materialist feminism and sustainable livelihoods framework to understand the livelihood impacts on FDWs' social and material lives. Methodologically, the paper draws from telephonic in-depth interviews done with 20 adult FDWs working in a residential township in Pune city of state of Maharashtra in India, housing middle to upper-middle class families. Adhering to the principles of feminist phenomenology, the argument is made through a recording and analysis of FDWs' oral narratives of their lived everyday experiences of COVID-19 and resultant loss of livelihoods. The paper generously draws from women's voices and their analyses to bring the similarity and differences in their experiences of COVID-19.

The paper begins by establishing the role as well as vulnerabilities of FDWs in India. Next, the paper discusses the ongoing incidence of COVID and its initial communalisation in the country. The next two sections are core analytical ones that describe and analyse the lived experiences of impact of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of FDWs. The analysis done is twofold: firstly, it gives a gendered analysis of livelihoods affected by COVID-19 and the following section presents an intersectional analysis of livelihood vulnerabilities of Muslim FDWs in the particular context of communalisation of COVID-19.

2. FDWs in India: Role and Vulnerabilities

Changes in recent years like transformation in class relations; family restructuring; and assertion of their right to economic independence by women in India have resulted in employment of domestic workers by a large number of urban households. Compelled by poverty, urban poor work as domestic workers in middle to upper class families and allow the working members of the household to continue their jobs. As social support of joint families disappears with emergence of nuclear families, employment of domestic workers has become a necessity for not only affluent but also middle and lower middle class families (Bhattacharya et al. 1).

Domestic workers are amongst the most exploited classes of workers in the world (HRW). Being in primarily a feminized form of occupation and mostly from disadvantaged caste groups, domestic workers and their work are assigned low value, materially as well as socially (Palriwala and Neetha 4). Lack of union due to widespread poverty and thus increased supply also results in little efforts to change undervaluation of domestic work. Further, underpayment is justified by the belief that domestic work does not require any skills.

Lack of effective legal protection and social security for domestic workers in India raises further challenges for them and renders them highly vulnerable. Claiming that regulating households as workplaces and families as employers could be difficult, India has been unable to provide domestic workers legal framework that ensures their safety (Neetha and Palriwala 97). India has not yet ratified the Domestic Workers Convention (C189) adopted by the ILO which came into force in September 2013. The Convention requires ratifying countries to ensure minimum wage protection and the social security of workers in the sector. The country has also not passed either of the two draft national

bills to protect domestic workers that have been in circulation since 2008². However, some states have passed laws for minimum wage and social security for domestic workers. Maharashtra is one such state which passed Maharashtra Domestic Workers' Welfare Board Act in 2008 and the rules for it were framed in 2010. Under one of the provisions, government is obliged to make a one-time payment of INR 10,000 to the domestic workers of age 55-60 years. As per the records, 30,000 domestic workers received INR 10,000 each in the year 2013-14. However, after 2014, no aid has been provided to a single domestic worker (Tirodkar). Presently, it appears that the Board is dysfunctional.

Being a part of unorganised labour and lacking unionization, social security and legal protection, they are left to the mercy of their employers and often work for excessively long hours and are often severely under-paid. They are routinely denied rights to health care, leaves, training, dignity and social justice in the best of non-disaster times. Already vulnerable, FDWs are now faced with job loss due to lockdown forced by Coronavirus epidemic (Shekhar).

3. COVID-19 Disaster and Loss of Livelihoods for FDWs in India³

By mid-March, 2020, India had declared COVID-19 a 'notified disaster'⁴ under the Disaster Management Act, 2005. Within India, Maharashtra continues to be country's most affected state. The country has been under nationwide lockdown since 25th March 2020, urging people to stay home except those in essential services and enforcing social distancing at least until 31st May, 2020.⁵ When lockdown was announced for the third time, Pune district was declared a red zone.⁶

Fear of 'outsiders' is common amidst rising cases and many people have discontinued the services of their domestic workers. In the township under study, most of the employers had asked their FDWs to stop coming as early as first week of March. As they are not registered with government as workers, and lack legal protection against termination of their jobs, FDWs have since been unemployed, unpaid and uncertain of their future as domestic workers. Most of the households and workers accepted this break in employment as a temporary restriction just for three weeks. However, even as Indian government has ended lockdown and allowed domestic workers to return to work, the families are still debating whether to let the workers in or not. Due to the lack of proper written orders from the state government stating if domestic workers are allowed or not in a particular state and no clear medical protocol, residential societies are still apprehensive and are refusing entry to FDWs.

4. Communalisation of COVID-19

As the world tries to address the health and economic challenges brought by COVID-19, India has faced additional challenge of its communalisation. About 9000 *tablighis* (a Islamic Sect) from around 40 countries gathered at Nizamuddin in Delhi in early March, despite ban on public gatherings by the government. Following which, about one-third of corona cases in India were the attendees of the congregation and their contacts. Though the gathering was a grossly irresponsible act, it was later found that Delhi government had already given permission to the organizers to hold the meeting. Also, until the time of the meeting, COVID-19 had not been considered as a health emergency in India.

Despite the fact that the country saw five-six other huge religious gatherings in and around March, a brand of raw communalism has been unleashed on *Tablighi* attendees in

particular and Muslims in general (Chatterji). Muslim minorities have had to face virulent attacks and blame campaign by Hindu rightwing groups. In media, they were being openly accused for bringing COVID-19 to India and were being called 'corona bombs', 'super-spreaders', and 'enemies of the nation' (The Wire). Increasingly, accounts of vigilante violence against Muslim vendors and others have since been reported from all parts of the country. This has shaped the view of majority population against Muslims in a country ruled by right wing BJP government which has struggled in preventing Muslims from being made the scapegoats in these times of fear. Such communalisation has had severe implications for Muslim FDWs as they struggle to get their jobs back in the homes of their employers.

5. Gender, Disaster and Vulnerability: An Intersectionality Framework

Disaster vulnerabilities are unequally distributed and social differentiation is a crucial determinant of vulnerability (Enarson and Morrow 1; Adger and Kelly 253). This paper uses gender, religion, and class as primary categories of analysis to determine the differential impact of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of FDWs.

It is well established that women and men are differently impacted by disasters (Krishna; Mishra 29; Mishra et al. 226). Unequal gender relations have put women at disadvantage by constructing unequal gender roles, unequal access to resources, spaces and power, restricted control over their bodies and denied access to institutions. Further, due to their paid and unpaid care-giving roles, women often find themselves at the forefront in disasters (Shiva; Enarson and Morrow, 1). Studies conducted particularly on aftermath of epidemics like Zika and Ebola virus have also highlighted the particular vulnerability of women (Harman 524; Wenham et al 49; Wenham et al 1).

Gender, however, is only one of the axes along which differentiated impacts of disasters are experienced. Disasters and their aftermaths reflect pre-existing social inequalities of class, caste, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and age; all intersecting with gender (Walia). To explore such differential impacts, the study adopts intersectionality approach. First coined in the 1990s by Crenshaw (7), it allows understanding how different axes of identity categories (gender, religion and class) intersect and construct different effects which are not possible to be explained by analysing single categories (Nightingale 153).

6. Livelihood Impact on FDWs: A Gendered Analysis

...I was a proud single mother. Never asked anybody for a penny and worked hard all my life. But today when my son stands in queue outside the mosque for food, I feel like a beggar. All my hard work for this... to be reduced to a beggar...

- Farzana

Access to and Availability of Livelihood Assets

Before exploring the impacts of COVID-19, it is pertinent to understand that the FDWs participating in the study come from traditionally disadvantaged caste and religious groups and have had poor and inadequate access to and availability of livelihood assets. Of the 20 FDWs who participated in the study, 14 are Muslims; and six belong to socially disadvantaged caste groups. None of them have completed their primary education, while most are illiterate. Significantly, as many as 12 of them are the primary earners and, thus, are heads of their households. Aged between 25 and 50 years, all of them have been working for more than ten years as domestic workers.

The economic undervaluation of the care work FDWs perform is well established (Palriwala and Neetha 511). Despite working for 10-12 hours every day without leave, FDWs are found to earn between INR 8,000 and 10,000 (roughly between USD 105 and USD 130) per month from work done in six-eight households. Due to informal nature of their contract with their employer, they do not get any other benefits or bonuses. Depending on the number of earning members in the household, their household income ranges between INR 10,000 and 18,000 (roughly between USD 130 and USD 236); with the lower range indicating income of female-headed household and the latter reflecting the income of other households. All of them live in rented one room accommodation in urban slums without separate kitchen and bathroom; for which they are paying a monthly rent between INR 3,000 and 6,500 (between USD 40 and USD 85).

According to the information provided by participants, the FDWs have also had poor access to education and skill trainings. In terms of social assets, their inter-personal relationships with their employers, especially female employer have been of immense support. Before COVID outbreak, they found support in terms of counselling for their children, suggestion in case of any instance of abuse and even a benevolent ear they provided when they faced everyday challenges. These relationships are considered to be one of the primary reasons for continuing in domestic work despite little increase in payment per chore over years. Relationship among FDWs is also valued by them.

Livelihood Outcomes: Increased Vulnerability and Renewed Adaptability

FDWs seek and work towards a range of livelihood outcomes based in their specific needs. Livelihood outcomes affected by COVID-19 are categorised into increased vulnerability and renewed adaptability. The manifestation of ways in which vulnerabilities are constructed and adaptabilities are renewed are discussed in this section.

Construction of Vulnerabilities

As the umbrella of opportunities provided by work to sustain livelihoods is diminished due to lockdown, there are many vulnerability factors that have emerged commonly for FDWs and their households. Owing to lack of other skills due to disadvantages in education, training and access to productive resources, coupled with triple responsibilities, FDWs are living with severe livelihood vulnerabilities.

Termination of Job: Due to the practice of giving termination notice in advance not being in practice in unorganized sector, the termination has been sudden and without any notice for them. In the first week of March, 2020, the domestic workers were asked to stop coming to work until called back. Asking them to stop as well as resume work has been a decision of the employers and the FDWs shared that they wanted to go back as soon as possible. As break in work means break in income, they cannot wait for COVID pandemic to be over or for treatment and cure to be found. All the participants shared that they have been asking their employers to allow them back for work but have been asked to wait. Further, all the FDWs' family members who were earlier working have also been forced out of work by lockdown as they were engaged in small unorganised labour or petty businesses (like running tea stalls or driving rented auto). This has meant complete loss of income for the households.

Loss of Household Income and Decreased Food Security: FDWs' wages are not even closely commensurate to the value of work done and leave little to no scope for savings. Despite

an order by the state government to the employers to not deduct salaries for the period FDWs would not be able to come, it emerged that, for all FDWs, who work for a cumulative 132 employers, only three have paid them salaries for the period of the lockdown. As FDWs fall out of safety nets provided by labour laws in India and their payment is entirely left to the discretion and choice of the employers, not even a part of the salary has been paid to the rest of the FDWs leaving them with sudden and almost complete loss of income.

Coming from a highly vulnerable economic situation, this has been a huge blow for the FDW's families as they struggle to meet their everyday rent, food and health needs. None of them have been able to pay their rent for last two months. Despite Maharashtra government having asked landlords and house owners to consider deferring the recovery of rent payment by three months, and consequently, not evict tenants, the landlords have deducted their rent from the deposit they made at the time of renting the house. The deposit is two months' rent in most cases and now FDWs are living with constant threat of being out of roof in a few days. With restricted travel within and outside city, they cannot even seek shelter with some relative or friend, leaving them extremely scared for their future.

Food insecurity is another immediate challenge before FDWs. With no money to buy ration, many of them are forced to seek food from public distribution systems and community charity. While state governments are trying to provide free ration to all in need and have also expanded the eligibility of certain poor to bigger amounts of grain per family per month, the provisions seem to be highly inadequate in reality. Resultantly, they have been forced to beg for milk and bread outside grocery shops so as to feed their families.

Despite the extreme pressures and traversing of gender roles to work outside to support their family, their primary socially prescribed gender role of ensuring food in kitchen and caring for the sick have remained the same. The economic stresses have had a double blow of increased inflation of essential goods as supply is falling short due to restricted transport and labour. With decreased income, FDWs also have to pay increased prices for other commodities of daily use. Such a situation has resulted in not only complete loss of savings but also FDWs being forced to take loans from relatives and/ or local financiers on heavy interest rates. Interestingly, in most cases, due to traditional notions of men being the ones responsible for money matters, the loan is taken by a male member of the family and it is the FDW who shall be required to pay it back. The FDWs in most cases were not even consulted before taking loans by their family members.

Increased Uncertainty and Reduced Wellbeing: Enhanced personal assets had been one of the positive livelihood outcomes of working as FDW. Constant insecurity about uncertainty of getting back their work has affected their psychological as well as physical health. Various reasons that motivated them to continue low-paid domestic work include feelings of independence, increased pride in community and enhanced decision making power within their family. As soon as they lost work, their wellbeing has taken a huge setback. Decrease in self-confidence and self-reliance are also resulted by FDWs' perceived decreased pride in their community as they face poverty and hunger due to loss of their jobs. Sadia shares:

...A Muslim charity kitchen is giving food to the needy as it is *ramzan* month. My son and I get meals from there. This is helping serve out immediate needs but I know it makes us very vulnerable in the long run. Even when I start earning, we would still be considered beggars in our community now. All my pride and self-respect in the community is lost now and that is my biggest loss...

As women stay at home, responsibility for caring for the sick and to provide emotional support to all in the family amidst these times of disaster is solely on FDWs. As women's expected role as provider of emotional support is vital in times of disaster (Enarson and Morrow 5), this has left them emotionally exhausted and with little acknowledgment of such damage by anyone.

Changes in Intra-household Relationships: COVID-19 has undone the little transformation of gender relationship that FDWs had been able to achieve in their households. Women's primary role as caregiver in the family has become more intensive even as their husband's primary role as earner has been completely abandoned. Spending more time at home, they are under increased pressure to maintain gender roles which they could be away from, for a period of time when they were working. Women also shared that no access to transportation has also meant that they cannot go to visit their friends or family if they want to give themselves some space away from the responsibilities of family life.

Incidence of Domestic Violence: Lockdown has also pushed women in increased situations of domestic violence. FDWs shared that while instances of verbal and physical abuse were not uncommon earlier, the frequency and intensity of such abuse has heightened during lockdown. Stuck in the homes with little respite from constant stress, they are now also the only and permanent target of the outlet of anger of their husbands. In all studied cases, the husbands are alcoholics and for first one and a half month, they could not buy alcohol due to shutdown of liquor shops. According to the FDWs, their partners' frustration arising out of loss of work and unavailability of alcohol emerges as a common excuse for their abusive behavior. Also, earlier, in some cases, FDWs would share experiences of abuse with their employers who motivated them to approach police and in few cases, employers themselves reported the case to police, resulting in gradual decrease in frequency of abuse in such cases. Such fear has been lost on husbands and brothers now. Madhu, the only FDW who reverse migrated with her husband to their village about 200 kilometres away, shares, "...I am stuck with him at his brother's house in village and he is always yelling at me. A hard slap or two are everyday story now. He gets local alcohol from his brother here. I know he is angry about losing his work but then so am I. He can take out all his frustration by hitting me, where do I take my anger out..."

Another manifestation of domestic violence shared by four participants is that unmarried young women are now being forced to be married and mothers are being forced by their husbands to produce more children. It is significant to note that paid work outside was a good way for these women to have a say in decision about these matters. Two young FDWs who are being forced to marry shared that earlier their parents and brothers did not want them to marry because they would lose the money they brought.

Changes in Work Relationships: COVID has not only visibilized the gendered power relations but also the cracks in the personal relationship between FDWs and their employers and also in the inter-personal relationships among FDWs. Without an exception, all FDWs shared a benevolent mutually interdependent relationship with their employers before COVID. However, there has been a sudden change in that relationship now. Since FDWs did not receive salaries or other financial support when sought during lockdown, they have been feeling sudden alienation from their employers with whom they had formed relationships going as long back as 10-15 years.

The FDWs had also developed friendly relationships among themselves where they referred each other for work and provide mutual emotional support. However, already, due to shortage of work, new conflicts have started emerging between FDWs as well. As

there increases distress, domestic workers will be ready to find work at much lower wages than they had been getting. Increased competition for scanty work opportunities has already created feelings of jealousy, distrust and resentment among FDWs.

As it is, wages for domestic work have been kept low due to lack of unionisation among FDWs. Also, two months spent during COVID have already showed that there is no actual 'need' to pay for FDWs as the women in the employer households are always available to perform household tasks. Additionally, most of the people living in the township work for IT companies, many of which have already announced that employees shall be working from home for around two years for now.

Renewed Adaptability and Agency

In the dim scenario of COVID disaster, vulnerabilities are immense and have left FDWs severely challenged. However, among these stories of devastation and hunger lie narratives that highlight women's adaptability to exercise their agency within and despite various structural constraints. Such stories are not many but not too few either; and strongly assert women's agency in earning livelihoods

Instead of accepting hunger and leaving themselves at the mercy of charity kitchens, FDWs have rearranged their livelihood strategies. They are actively engaging in dialogue with their previous as well as potential employers to express their availability for work. They are already diversifying into new livelihood activities and also thinking of new activities that they shall undertake if they are never called back for work. Their fear of losing their freedom to work outside their homes is the primary factor pushing them to find alternative means of income and productive freedom despite the little scope that lockdown has left for unorganised economic activities.

Diversification of Livelihood Strategies: Diversification of livelihood activities is considered as important response strategy to reduce vulnerabilities (Djouidi et al. 248). As many as one fourth of FDWs have diversified into small businesses until they can be allowed to go back to domestic work. As the lockdown allows businesses dealing in essential commodities, five FDWs have started small vegetable and fruit vending businesses. As they are new to the trade, the profit is little but that is helping them get by in these jobless days. Vrinda shares, "It is tough, but for how long could we wait for someone to do something for us. My husband is useless and I had to do something. My cousin sells fruits in Camp, he suggested linking me up with a supplier who supplies fruits in our area. And that's how I started. It has just been a week but I am able to take a profit of about INR 150-200 everyday..." Like Vrinda, other FDWs are quickly and increasingly adopting other available livelihood options.

Community-based and Co-strategized Strategies: As FDWs and other women living in same neighbourhood find themselves without income and food, some of them have come together and formed community based, co-strategised strategies to earn food for them. As they learn about mosque based food distribution for the poor, four of the FDWs living in the same community offered to help in cooking of the food that is distributed. In this way, they feel like they have earned food for their family and have been feeling less dejected than they were when they were just receiving food as part of relief distribution by mosque community. These four FDWs meet with other women everyday and contribute in cooking through different chores and have started to feel ownership of the distribution program. By planning and proactively deciding to offer their labour, they are able to meet their personal needs for dignified living. As all these women have

similar food habits and know cooking the commonly distributed food items, it becomes easier and natural for them to 'co-strategize' about their need to engage in this livelihood activity. Co-strategizing with community women as a livelihood strategy facilitates the exchange of empowerment, information, learning and some sense of independence of many women. These strategies promise the possibilities for cooperation and exchange around women's common needs even during COVID-19.

7. Communalisation of COVID-19 and Livelihood Impact on Muslim FDWs: An Intersectional Analysis

The impact of COVID-19 on increasing vulnerabilities and reducing opportunities of the FDWs is essentially interlinked with the social relations of religion which determine the dis/in/ability of the poor in the overall context of communalisation of COVID-19 in the country. Despite having crossed the stereotyped barriers on their mobility in market space to do paid work outside their homes, Muslim FDWs are finding themselves being pushed back into their homes by their employers as well as the state authorities. For these FDWs, their religion and gender are manifested in complex manners to increase their vulnerability much more than Hindu FDWs who have similar economic and familial life situations.

Discrimination in Recruitment

Muslim FDWs still choose not to divulge their religious identities during recruitment meetings to better their chances of finding employment. To negotiate better wages, eleven Muslim FDWs have adopted Hindu work names as almost all the households where they seek employment are Hindu. Some chores require access to kitchen and prayer room and wages are dependent on the number of chores. Two FDWs shared that they revealed their religious identity later in certain homes when they felt safe in doing so. In most such cases, their access to kitchen and prayer rooms was subtly restricted on learning about her religion. Though the employers did not terminate their employment, they are routinely told to not make themselves present on festivals and during daily prayer times. The idea of pollution associated with beef-eating of Muslims continues to exclude them from vegetarian as well as non-vegetarian households of their employers.

Challenges in Re-employment

Due to communalisation of COVID-19 through media, Muslims are experiencing direct blame and discrimination for the spread from many common people. Such blame game has not only made their employers ask Muslim FDWs to never come back again but also severely hampered their chances of being re-employed after COVID-19 outbreak is over. Reshma was still shocked when she shared, "...I was shocked to hear her say that it was 'us', Muslims who created this problem and now I should go and seek help from *tablighis*. I do not even know who *tablighis* are. She then asked me to never call her or to come to her place. I had been working in her home for 12 hours a day for ten years..."

Responding to the question if they have been asked to re-join once coronavirus is over, except one, all Muslim FDWs answered in negative. On the other hand, Hindu FDWs were hopeful of going back to their jobs once the immediate scare is over as their employers have told them that they will be asked to come back in a couple of months. Though there is uncertainty in cases of all FDWs, the Muslim FDWs are sure of having to look for new employers after COVID-19, which as mentioned earlier is difficult to begin with. Also, as

competition for work rises after COVID-19, Muslim FDWs fear that if they get re-employed, they will have to work for much less price per chore than before COVID, creating conditions for much delayed recuperation from the damage done by the non-work months.

Challenges in Diversifying Livelihood Activities

The falsely publicised role in spreading COVID-19 has significantly reduced Muslim FDWs' and their families' access to alternative market space. According to the Muslim FDWs, they are not being allowed to set stalls and petty shops which are relatively more permissible for other religions. FDWs shared that authorities responsible for enforcing lockdown and inhibiting people's presence in public space are more intolerant with them when they try to come out and set a stall to earn some money for the day. In rare case where they were able to start a small business, they faced the challenge of attracting customers. Aliya shares: "...We got money on loan from my son's friend to buy and sell bananas. People would come on their vehicles towards us but as soon as they noticed skull cap on my son, they would drive to the next stall..."

While Hindu FDWs face economic losses, the feeling of uncertainty of job in post COVID times is much stronger in Muslim FDWs who shared that they face discrimination and rejection from many potential employers, especially after communalisation of the disease. In a society that discriminates against both disadvantaged caste groups and certain religious group, employers might conveniently continue to ignore the 'polluting' presence of 'low' caste but Hindu employees to make their lives comfortable.

Dilution of Solidarity between Socially Disadvantaged Religious and Caste Groups

FDWs have been sharing in the social and economic devaluation of domestic work and its gendered, class, and caste characteristics but they are also faced with additional wedge of communalism. As FDWs find themselves experiencing religion differentials in coping outcomes, dilution of their solidarity as FDWs and as socially and economically disadvantaged group has begun. They are already experiencing feelings of competition and jealousy as one group experiences damages more permanently and more severely than others.

Oversimplification of Marking of Spaces as Containment and Non-containment Zones

Not surprisingly, all the Muslim FDWs interviewed for the study come from containment zones and live in thickly populated Muslim dominated areas. While on the one hand, they face wider spread of infection, they also experience closure of their residential and common spaces for longer than those in non-containment zones. The residential township had also carried out directives to not allow FDWs from containment zones without a medical certificate. Getting a medical certificate costs about INR 300-500 (a huge amount considering the severe economic crisis facing them) and is valid only for five days; leaving FDWs from containment zones to have to wait for much longer before they can try re-joining the work, even if permitted by their employers.

Conclusion

Recognising the extent to which COVID-19 outbreak affects women and men differently is essential to understand and address its impacts. The continued devaluation of feminized paid domestic work and resurgence of communalisation during COVID-19 have exposed

FDWs to long-term damaging impacts of their livelihood options. Other than bringing FDWs face to face with hunger, it has also severed the inter-personal and inter-community relations that had until now supported them in various ways.

Going forward, it is necessary that voices and experiences of marginalised gender and religious groups are incorporated in response to COVID-19. Bringing them in the social security net available for salaried organised workers can not only provide them a cushion against exploitative work conditions but would also help them cope in the event of disaster. More than ever, the post COVID-19 times shall be the right time for the government to expedite the process of reviewing the Draft bills on domestic workers and passing of the national legislation to protect their rights against labour exploitation. While the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 covers domestic workers, its execution needs to be more effective. Complete loss of income for domestic workers argues for involvement of civil society organizations, governmental and non-governmental organisations to collectively work towards enhancing wages and working conditions for domestic workers. COVID-19, thus, does not only expose the cracks in social justice but also creates opportunities for advancing a just and equitable society.

Pune, Maharashtra

Notes

- ¹ Names of all FDWs have been changed to maintain confidentiality.
- ² Domestic Workers (Registration, Social Security and Welfare) Act, 2008 and the Draft National Policy on Domestic Workers as recommended by the Taskforce on Domestic Workers
- ³ The paper was drafted in May-June 2020
- ⁴ Notifying COVID-19 as a disaster enables the states in the country to spend a larger chunk of funds from the State Disaster Response Fund to fight the pandemic
- ⁵ In Maharashtra, the lockdown has been lifted on 31st May, 2020 except in containment zones. A large number of domestic workers coming into the site of study are from containment zones which are, in most cases, densely populated parts of the city.
- ⁶ The 733 districts of India have been broadly divided into Red Zones, Orange Zones and Green Zones. The zone classification indicates the number of cases and determines the kind of restrictions placed on the movement of people and supply of goods in a district. Districts with highest incidence of cases were declared red zone in India.

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