



GRRIPP

Gender Responsive
Resilience and Intersectionality in
Policy and Practice

REIMAGINING THE WORLD OF WOMEN'S WORK POST CRISES

SEWA BHARAT

Jharkhand and West Bengal, INDIA

Context

SEWA Bharat is a federation of State-level member-based organisations, that aims to achieve full employment and self-reliance for all its members. SEWA West Bengal and SEWA Jharkhand work towards the economic empowerment of women workers primarily employed in the informal economy.

This project looked at the impact of an unending cascade of crises faced by women workers primarily employed in the informal sector in two Indian states (Jharkhand and West Bengal). The aim was to better understand how to support women workers, particularly rural and tribal women, in adjusting to a post-pandemic world, and expand the potential for both alternate livelihoods and increased access to a social security net.

Therefore, the project looked at the specific challenges these women faced to co-design strategies for local advocacy that are rooted in a combination of data and collective mobilisation. This project was co-designed and developed with community members to increase impact and relevance, building on decades of mobilising work by the SEWA movement.

Research questions

The study explored the type of livelihoods that supports women workers in achieving full and dignified employment, as well as increasing their social and political capital. What bundle of services would best support women and their needs? And what role does digital literacy play in livelihoods in post-COVID19 world?

Approach & Methodology

A survey was undertaken with 1500 women in West Bengal and 600 women in Jharkhand. 54% of the total sample size is a member of SEWA. Data collection was carried out by young women of SEWA Sarvekshan, a collective of grassroots data collectors. They had been trained through online training sessions to carry out interviews while simultaneously entering data into KoBo Toolbox, a software for digital data collection and management.

A mapping tool was also designed to ascertain the accessibility of key locations such as the vegetable market or the university from a central point in women's town. Accessibility was assessed through multiple indicators such as availability and cost of transportation or incidence of harassment.

Questionnaires have been designed to not only understand SEWA's informal workers communities in West Bengal and Jharkhand but also to gain clarity on the struggles and aspirations of the data collectors themselves who are the next generation of women from the communities with a desire to achieve a different future for themselves.



Stakeholder consultation in West Bengal on the 19th May 2022.
Credits: SEWA Bharat

Key findings

in West Bengal, beedi rollers and weavers were particularly impacted by the pandemic and ensuing lockdown. Beedi rollers were unable to bring in raw materials or go out and sell what they had made. A halt in beedi production led to loss of work/income, financial distress and loss of community due to isolation.

Husbands of most women in the sample from West Bengal are migrant laborers leaving the responsibility to provide for the household on a daily basis to women. 58% of the women depended on banks for access to capital, using debt from savings as a source of relief. Meanwhile, 35% of respondents depended on Self Help Groups, mainly handicraft/weavers, construction workers, domestic workers, yarn weavers, tailors, sewers and small shop owners.

In Jharkhand, seasonal unemployment is a major issue particularly for construction workers. This is due to the lack of availability of work during monsoons, the preference of contractors for young girls and external factors like sand strikes which had rendered workers unemployed for about one and a half month.

Moonlighting (i.e. holding two or more jobs, so as to supplement income) is a common occurrence. Construction work is one of the most common forms of subsidiary work with agriculture being the principal status work. Social security benefits and job security is available only for a very small percentage of regular salaried workers and even amongst those, all do not have access to it.

Recommendations

The study highlights a number of recommendations to support women's access to full employment (economic security, food security and social security) and self-reliance (both economically and in terms of their decision-making ability).

For women who do not want to / cannot shift to alternative sources of livelihood, interventions need to be designed to improve conditions associated with their existing trades. This is particularly the case in West Bengal where any diversification tends to be pursued along with beedi rolling and never as a substitute because of low profitability.

In Jharkhand, since most agricultural workers would like to remain in the trade, motivating women (and their families) to implement innovative farming methods, establishing and harnessing SEWA's model of "collective bargaining power" to get better prices as well as access to credit, digital tools and digital literacy would benefit them immensely.

Other recommendations include the registration of all workers with the construction workers welfare boards so that they have BOCW cards that they can use for relief during times of crises. It is also important to keep in mind the gender and class inequalities that decide whether a person owns digital assets or has access to the internet or not. Skill building on its own without asset creation would prevent long-term impact from taking place.

The Next Generation of Women

All data collectors were from the surveyed communities and as a part of the study, a short inquiry was done with them too to understand their aspirations and struggles. All of them reported how patriarchal attitudes, early marriage and lack of opportunities are significant barriers.

The pay they received from conducting the survey helped them cover tuition fees and support their family financially. They enjoyed the mobility and social interactions resulting from this work. All of them aspire to qualified jobs: becoming nurse, teacher and policy officer.

Reimagining the World of Women's Work Post-Crises

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