

**Mina Swaminathan Media Fellowship
for Gender and Development**



M S Swaminathan Research Foundation
Science for Sustainable Development

Gendered Impact of Covid-19 on the Livelihoods of Plantation Workers in Kerala: The Bitter Life of Tea Plantation Labourers Behind a Strong Cup of Tea

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Introduction:

The Covid-19 pandemic has created new challenges for women, apart from exacerbating existing gender inequalities and undoing past achievements. Its adverse impacts are visible specifically in the areas of agriculture, employment, income, access to markets, health care, mental health, household maintenance, burden of childcare and other care work. The prolonged lockdown has placed restrictions on the movement of people and goods, disrupted food production systems and value chains, with negative impacts on smallholder farmers' livelihoods and household food and nutrition security. The pandemic has affected both men and women, but women face greater barriers to

About the fellowship: The core objective of the fellowship is to promote the exchange of ideas between researchers and the media for greater partnerships between science and society. The theme of the 2020-21 fellowship was to better understand the gendered Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's livelihood, and food and nutrition security amongst poor households. The 2020-21 fellowship focused on three states of India – Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Odisha. Three young journalists were selected as Media fellows to report on theme.

recovery, given their limited access to productive resources and services including credit, land, knowledge, skills and information, alongside greater responsibilities for care at the household and societal levels. In this context, to nurture the exchange of ideas between researchers and the media, and to ensure a reporting of rural affairs, especially in the vernacular press, the Mina Swaminathan Media Fellowship for Gender and Development was established by the Foundation in 2020.

Study Context in Kerala

The plantation workers are one of the main agriculture workers in the state especially tea plantations. The existing vulnerabilities and marginalization of plantation workers was further exacerbated due to the Covid-19 induced lockdowns. Even pre-pandemic, they lacked access to basic amenities like toilets, safe drinking water, proper housing and balanced diets; the impact of lockdowns deepened their crisis and widened the social and gender inequalities. Most of the labourers who depend on plantation work are women, including widows, old women as well as women suffering from chronic diseases. Many of them live in estates, abandoned by the owners. They work in neighboring fields and villages under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and supplement their incomes from the allocated small portions of abandoned plantations.

Key gender issues faced during Covid-19 by the Plantation labourers

- 1) Labourers do not have access to safe and proper housing, they live in small lane houses or '*layams*' composed of single or two small rooms situated next to each other in dilapidated condition. During the lockdown period, as everyone stayed at home, this worsened the situation; some



layams accommodated 10- 12 members within one or two small rooms. They also do not have access to proper toilet facilities and safe drinking water.

- 2) It is important to note that free food kits and food grains supplied by the government indeed helped them prevent starvation. As many of the households do not have proper ration cards that include all members of the household, this posed a challenge in terms of accessing adequate amounts of ration to meet the requirements of the households (Box 1). Some families didn't have a ration card due to the change in their names in the supporting identity proof documents. There are families who are eligible to be under the below poverty line but allotted with above poverty line (non-priority non-subsidy) ration cards. They end up spending more for household food consumption. Lack of knowledge and access to information made their lives more vulnerable during the pandemic.
- 3) Though they don't feel hunger, they lack access to a balanced and nutritious diet, a pre-pandemic problem, which has been further deepened. Mr. Faisal says, "During free kit distribution, I saw a woman, she said, '*For five kilograms of rice we walked eight kilometres*'. I met a child in the plantation area, he said that it is the second time he eats biscuits".
- 4) Similar to other agricultural crops, the supply chain in plantations was also under threat, which led to a gap in providing timely wages to labourers. Most importantly, they lost their employment due to closedown of the tea plantations and restrictions in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme works and daily wage jobs.

Box 1

Mr. Faisal Muhammad, a teacher in Elappara Panchayat High School says, "I got a call from a girl child who lives in the Elappara plantation area during the lockdown period. She asked "*Sir, rice in our house has been over could you please help in any way*" She sought help to get food grains. She told me that their family got free rations. But her family consists of twelve members. So, they are unable to survive with the amount of food supplies they received". Names of some members of her family were not included in the ration card.



- 5) As the schools were closed, the safety of children became a big concern for parents, as children left alone at home were vulnerable to abuse and other forms of harassment. The teacher from one of the primary schools shared that he received many calls, especially from girl children, during the COVID-19 lockdown.
- 6) Similarly, differently-abled children and their mothers within the plantation areas were vulnerable as the special school to cater them was also closed. This has caused a decline in their mental health and happiness. Parents of such children, especially mothers, are not able to go to work leaving their children alone at home.

Recommendations

- 1) Investment to improve the living conditions of labour families as a priority to ensure access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene conditions.
- 2) Creating opportunity for quality education for younger girls and boys is needed if their condition has to change. Efforts to organize special free government coaching classes, entrance coaching classes etc. have to be provided.
- 3) Improvement in the services of ASHA workers in delivering health services and identification and treatment of malnutrition.
- 4) Increase awareness among women and household members about the ration card as they are dependent on the PDS services.
- 5) Continue the PDS services with balanced food to such marginalized households
- 6) Ensure the safety for both girl and boy children and special children by having day care arrangements which support women to spend time for productive work.



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