

Mina Swaminathan Media Fellowship for Gender and Development

Gendered Impact of Covid-19 on the livelihoods of tribal communities in Odisha

October 2021



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.

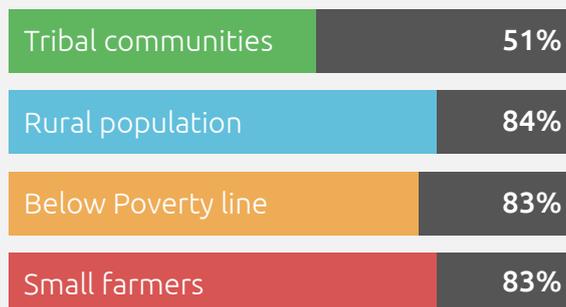
Study site in Odisha:

The Koraput district in Odisha is one of the tribal dominant districts, about 51% of the households belonging to tribal communities. The district has a high proportion of rural population (84%), households Below Poverty line (83%) and small farmers (83%) along with severe malnutrition issues. Agriculture production is largely subsistence based and 72% of the workforce depends on agriculture as cultivators and agriculture labourers.

Key gender issues faced by tribal households:

The gender issues that made tribal farmers more vulnerable due to the extended lockdown, travel restrictions and social distancing are:

- 1) As the landscape of the tribal habitations are geographically isolated and have less access to proper road and transport services, they faced more challenges in accessing essential services especially public distribution system (PDS) for food and essential medical services (Box 1).
- 2) The food products supplied through the PDS during the pandemic was not adequate to address the balanced nutrition of the tribal families.



- 3) Besides food and nutritional issues, tribal families access to basic medical services especially the health of pregnant mothers and adolescence girls was affected.

Best practices adopted to mitigate the adverse impacts on health and livelihoods

- 1) Many of the tribal families cultivate millets for their subsistence food requirements. The improved production technologies especially for finger millet helped them to get three times higher production, and during the crisis, enabled the families to meet their household food requirements.
- 2) The tribal communities whose livelihoods are depend on forest products such as *jhadus* (hill brooms) collection from hills was affected like other crops due to the closure of both market and transport. The government officials took an innovative step and linked the tribals with consumers through e-Commerce platforms. Such as proactive and innovative action enabled women to improve their digital skills and adapt to the changing situation quickly, expanding their institutional networks and links.
- 3) By highlighting the status of malnutrition across blocks, awareness was created for action during the pandemic. The nutrition garden initiative proved to be one of the strategies to address the malnutrition issue, with the state government developing a model and rolling out a scheme called "*Mo Poshan Bagicha*" [My Nutrition Garden] through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme to build an asset for every household.

Box 1

Lathiguda village of Bariniput Gram Panchayat (GP) near Jeypore block is situated on the top of the hills between three hillocks which is about 10 km from Jeypore town. 10 Kandha families are residing in this village. They used to depend on wage labour at Jeypore town, but lost their wages during this period. There is no road connectivity to this village. They have to walk around 6 km in the hill route to come to the GP to avail their rations and other benefits. They have been deprived of health and other essential facilities. They are deprived of different social security schemes provided by the government. During the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, these families suffered a lot, struggling to get sufficient food for their existence.



Recommendations

- 1) Decentralized, site-specific strategies are necessary to reach the unreached (Hill dwellers living in remote areas) to meet their fundamental rights especially during such a pandemic context.
- 2) The government should consider changes in the present strategies of ICDS and PDS systems, to ensure sufficient nutrition to the local population.
- 3) Best practices that address the food, nutrition and livelihoods needs should be scaled-up by government to especially reach geographically isolated habitations.



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