

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 Women farmers and agricultural workers and fishers in Tamil Nadu

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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 sites in Tamil Nadu

Women in agriculture make up 80 percent of the total agricultural workforce in the state. In the fishing sector, women engage in post-harvest marketing and processing. They spend nearly 16 hours a day on household chores and productive work in their respective sectors. What happened to these women workers during the first phase of lockdown between March – May 2020 was explored with women farmers, farm labourers and fishers in Villupuram and Nagapatinam districts of Tamil Nadu.

I. Key gender issues faced by landless and women farm labourers

- 1) The gender wage gap is very wide; while men receive Rs 500 per day, women get only Rs 90-100 per day. Even though women engage in many agricultural operations, their contributions go unnoticed as unpaid labour. Both landless labourers and small holding women primarily depend on wage work as their primary source of income. However, due to the disruption in the supply chain, many of the crops cultivated by farmers could not be harvested, impacting the employment opportunities of both these categories of women.
- 2) The government started the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment



- Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) work from July 2020 amidst the risk of infection due to Covid-19. Women who were above 50 years did not have access to these jobs due to the higher risk of infection. Also, the number of days of work for women, in the studied districts, was low, though under the MGNREGS, a rural household is entitled to get 100 days of work in a year.
- 3) Farmers and their families depend on rice provided under the Public Distribution System (PDS). Yet, we found that in many cases, it was unsuitable for consumption. Families who usually included fish and meat, once every week, found it hard to bear the cost of a nutritious diet after lockdown. They had no option to buy, but to depend mainly on the rice provided under the PDS.
 - 4) Women have the primary responsibility to manage both the farm and their family. After lockdown, in the absence of regular income, they mortgaged their jewellery, like earrings and thali (*mangal sutra*), utensils, cows, goats and poultry, which are women's sole assets. In addition, they took loans from microfinance institutions at high interest rates of 24-60% to ensure their household's food security.
 - 5) Most women are not recognized as 'farmers' because they do not have land in their name. Thus, they do not have access to government welfare schemes due to lack of recognition of farmers. Some women lease land and farm alone or in groups. They do not have a farmer's card or Kisan Credit Card. Therefore, there is a situation where they do not get the financial assistance of Rs. 6,000 from the Central Government under *PM Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana*.
 - 6) Women in the area who are members of agricultural groups, get loans from banks;



others get exploited by borrowing from private financial institutions at high interest rates. Women work for wages on land and pay off such debts, however, during the lockdown, they could not repay their loans. Banks are refusing to give the next loan, if they don't repay existing ones. During the pandemic, though the government urged financial institutions not to charge interest rates during the lockdown, in practice this did not happen. Banks did not charge interest for only three months, from April to June, though women began to get employment only from October 2020. It has also become commonplace to insult women by speaking indecently while collecting debts.

The on-going pandemic has widened socio-economic inequalities and adversely affected the nutrition security of poor households, reiterating also the social norm of women as food providers. Loss of work for women agricultural workers is likely to enhance socio-economic inequalities, and reverse progress towards gender equality created through educational activities.

Hence in evolving schemes and plans to build back better, strategies that promote transformative social/gender changes are needed.

- 1) Giving barren and fallow lands to women on long-term lease, adopting a collective approach; and according women the status of 'farmers' and giving them 'incentives', will ensure sustainable livelihoods to women agricultural workers ;
- 2) Covid-19 has increased the compulsion to focus and redirect government subsidies to women farm workers, and consider them not just as wage earners but as professional producers and workers;



Rs. 90-100/Day

WAGE GAP



Rs. 500/Day



- 3) Promoting the collective agency of women farmers in accessing financial services, their entitlements and developing appropriate measures to ensure uninterrupted credit services and
- 4) As households fall back on PDS, that has supported them to cope with the lockdowns and meet their food requirements, it is necessary to extend comprehensive food and nutrition aid/ support to women for reducing their stress and vulnerability in ensuring household nutritious food needs when households do not have access to employment.

I. 2) Covid-19 and Fishing women

The gender issues in the fishing sector are completely different from those of women farmers and farm labourers.

Key gendered issues

- 1) Fish is the staple food of the coastal communities. But lockdown forced the coastal people in Poombukar in Nagapattinam district to change their diets as there was no fish available. Lack of fish worsened the quality of their diets and reduced the intake of required nutrients. Vegetables too were being sold at a high price, hence their daily diet was reduced to ration rice with some vegetables.
- 2) Fisher women were already facing challenges in accessing public transport due to the smell of the fish. New forms of untouchability through 'social distancing' have excluded them completely. Auto drivers have doubled the fares for women transporting fish to nearby towns during the lockdown. This has restricted the mobility of many fisher women, who stay at home, having lost their economic activities and incomes.



- 3) Household income has declined sharply due to the inability of men to go to sea for fishing and therefore lack of fish that women could sell. Domestic violence has increased as men are forced to stay at home and consuming alcohol. Further, even when the restrictions were relaxed, women faced challenges in marketing the fish due to both lower demand and continuing inter-district and inter-state travel restrictions. They could earn only Rs 100 for a basket of mixed-size fish, which earlier brought them around Rs 2,000-3,000.
- 4) The state government provides financial assistance of Rs 5,000 to a fishing family during the fishing ban period, however single fisher women did not get this amount.
- 5) Women also faced constraints in purchasing necessary inputs for their sale and process such as ice (as production units were closed) and salt.

Recommendations

- 1) To ensure the livelihoods, cold storage facility to preserve and sell the fish, basic needs like ice box, scales, mat, umbrella etc. remain urgent requirements.
- 2) Security at the fish market and toilet facilities should be provided.
- 3) Special vehicle facilities for loading fish will reduce women's drudgery in head loading.
- 4) A minimum loan at a low interest rate is an important need to be addressed by the Fisheries Society, either directly or through banks.
- 5) Compensation for fishing women during the monsoon season is usually Rs. 4,500. There is a demand from these women to increase this amount in view of the post-Covid-19 condition, and also provide insurance services for their lives and stocks.



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