

Women Cannot Leave Home To Work, Now They Cannot Work From Home: Double Marginalisation In The Times Of Coronavirus

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Most women in India work on the peripheries of the nation's work life, as unskilled manual labour in insecure, multiple part-time jobs, at lower wages than men. They are barely able to surmount social and physical barriers to step out of home to work. The 'work from home' directive to limit the pandemic marginalises them twice over.

Keywords: Coronavirus; Work From Home; Gender; Marginalisation; India



Introduction

It is in the nature of the novel Coronavirus to inflict its severest attack on those with the lowest immunity. Much in the same vein, the new 'work from home' dynamic unleashed by the pandemic has wreaked its harshest hit on the most vulnerable among our workers, the working women. Already burdened with disadvantages, very few Indian women even manage to step outside their homes and into the country's workforce. A World Bank report ranks India at a poor 121, of 131 countries, in Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP).¹ Indeed, no more than

¹ Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate), India. World Bank Group, September 2019

23.6 per cent women in the working age group are part of India's workforce.² Of these few, 94 per cent are in the unorganised sector.³ Working on the peripheries of our nation's work life, as maids, petty vendors, construction labour etc. With low literacy levels and skills, in insecure and often multiple part-time jobs, at lower wages than men, without any unionisation. And the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed these vulnerable working women even further. Barely able to overcome the social and physical barriers to working away from home, following the new 'work from home' directive being issued to combat the present health crisis is a non-option for them. And is poised to drive multitudes of women out of the workforce completely.

WFH (work from home) is the new normal in the world of work across the globe

The currency of the acronym WFH as engendered by the pandemic is perhaps best evidenced when a Google news search for 'WFM+Coronavirus' throws up over 1,88,00,000 results.⁴ With Coronavirus now having affected more than 209 countries, media from over the globe is reporting the unravelling of a new dynamic in the world of work.⁵ 'WFH is the new black' announces Mondaq, a Washington-based content aggregator for financial and legal news.⁶ The BBC informs that from the UK to the US, Japan to South Korea, global companies — such as Google, Microsoft, Twitter, Hitachi, Apple, Amazon, Chevron, Salesforce, Spotify — have rolled out mandatory work-from-home policies amid the spread of Covid-19. A *Time* magazine feature is headlined 'Americans are being encouraged to work from home during the Coronavirus outbreak; for millions, that's impossible'.⁷ Reporting that numerous companies in Russia have introduced work from home arrangements for staff, Moscow-based publication *Russia Beyond* names internet corporation Mail.ru and media group Comnews.ru as examples.⁸ News website Al Arabiya says Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development has issued "remote-

² Women and men in India (A statistical compilation of gender related indicators in India), Central Statistics Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, 2018

³ Manju. (2017) Women in unorganized sector - Problems & issues in India, *International Journal of Applied Research*. 3(4). 829-32. Delhi <http://www.allresearchjournal.com/archives/2017/vol3issue4/Part1/3-4-182-302.pdf>

⁴ Such a Google search was generated by the author on March 31, 2020, around 12.30 pm (IST). Please note that the precise number of results cited is liable to vary with time.

⁵ Source: Worldometer: Coronavirus

<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/countries-where-coronavirus-has-spread/>

⁶ Young, Kevin M. and Li, Zheyao. (2020, 31 March). WFH Is The New Black: Avoiding Wage And Hour Pitfalls As Work From Home Hits The COVID-19 Mainstream, *Mondaq*, <https://www.mondaq.com/unitedstates/Employment-and-HR/910212/WFH-Is-The-New-Black-Avoiding-Wage-And-Hour-Pitfalls-As-Work-From-Home-Hits-The-COVID-19-Mainstream>

⁷ Law, Tara. (2020, March 9). Americans Are Being Encouraged to Work From Home During the Coronavirus Outbreak. For Millions, That's Impossible. *Time Magazine*, <https://www.bibme.org/citation-guide/apa/newspaper/>

⁸ Ryabikova, Victoria. (2020, March 17). How has life in Moscow changed due to coronavirus?. *Russia Beyond*, <https://www.rbth.com/lifestyle/331835-how-has-life-in-moscow-with-coronavirus>

work” guidelines for employees and employers in the private sector to contain the spread of the novel Coronavirus.⁹

In India too, WFH has been become the new mantra to limit the pandemic. Several state governments, including those of Kerala, Haryana and Karnataka have released advisories to ‘MNCs, BPOs, IT and large firms’ to allow employees to work from home.¹⁰ The central government’s telecom department has accepted industry body NASSCOM’s request seeking urgent support on easing regulatory restrictions relating to work from home under the Other Service Providers regime.¹¹ Nearly half of India’s technology workers – estimated at three million – have already begun to work from home as social distancing becomes key to contain the spread of the outbreak.¹² Bengaluru, often referred to as the Silicon Valley of India, has been put under a lockdown with most top technology companies asking their staff to work from home.¹³ Meanwhile, many technology and back office firms across India have already moved significant amounts of their work to homes of staff. Tata Consultancy Services has asked over 40 per cent of its staff to work from home. Accenture has moved 60 per cent of its employees out of its offices to work from home. The auto sector has made a similar shift. Auto major Ford has instructed 10,000 employees in India to work from home.¹⁴ The wholly-owned arm of its Swedish parent company, Volvo India has declared a work from home policy. So also Tata Motors, for its staff based out of its headquarters and its regional offices.

But women in India barely manage to step out to WOH (work outside home)

Ironically, even as India Inc. directs its employees to shift their working bases to their homes to combat the current public health emergency, getting out of home to work remains a struggle for women in our country.

⁹ Abueish, Tamara. (17 March 2020). Coronavirus: Saudi Arabia issues ‘work from home’ guideline for private sectors. *Al Arabiya English*. <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/03/17/Coronavirus-Saudi-Arabia-issues-work-from-home-guideline-for-private-sectors>

¹⁰ Mathur, Nandita. Kundu, Rhik. M.K., Nidheesh. (2020, March 17). Coronavirus: Allow employees to work from home, states tell firms. *Livemint*, <https://www.livemint.com/companies/news/coronavirus-allow-employees-to-work-from-home-states-tell-firms-11584468960852.html>

¹¹ NASSCOM or the National Association of Software and Service Companies is a trade association of Indian Information Technology and Business Process Outsourcing industry.

¹² Sangani, Priyanka. (2020, March 23). Coronavirus crisis may fast-forward IT’s work-from-home adoption. *The Economic Times*, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/ites/coronavirus-crisis-may-fast-forward-its-work-from-home-adoption/articleshow/74766020.cms?from=mdr>

¹³ Ahmad, Samreen and Alawadhi, Neha. (2020, March 13). Coronavirus: Bengaluru shuts down: firms ask employees to work from home. *Business Standard*, https://www.business-standard.com/article/companies/coronavirus-bengaluru-shuts-down-firms-ask-employees-to-work-from-home-120031300402_1.html

¹⁴ Coronavirus | Ford asks 10,000 employees in India to work from home (2020, March 17). *The Hindu*, <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/coronavirus-ford-asks-10000-employees-in-india-to-work-from-home/article31089427.ece>

IDF's research on gender and labour, spanning many years and across India, has consistently revealed that severe social and physical impediments obstruct women from leaving their homes, families and communities to work 'outside'. The most recent evidence of this, in fact, emerges from IDF's study of Disha a five-year-long programme across five Indian states to connect a million women to income opportunities.¹⁵ Significantly, restrained mobility is most commonly cited by the Disha participants as a primary barrier to women's getting into and continuing with higher education, jobs, businesses, and careers.

Women who participated in Disha are variously students, employed, petty entrepreneurs, producers, or seeking to be these, and they are residents of cities, small towns and villages. Across which identity spectrum, they are united by the inability to negotiate their way out of their homes and into spaces that house opportunities and income, such as colleges, offices, factories, shops and markets. The barriers that confront women are broadly of two types.

One, social prejudices prevent women from leaving home. Mobility in women is associated with independence that is uncontrollable, and rife with possibilities encouraging wantonness. Also, communities and families, especially in smaller towns and villages, associate women working outside homes to earn with men's inability to protect and provide for them. While sons are pushed to work by families, daughters are rarely 'allowed' to do so. 'Good women' stay at home and look after their families, said a middle-aged woman participant in a Disha intervention to promote micro-enterprise in Karnataka's Dharwad district.¹⁶ Even though she was participating in a training for entrepreneurship, she was certain her husband would never let her leave home to grow a business, no matter how squeezed the family finances. He would perceive her abandoning their children to earn as his failure as a man to fend for his family. Another woman participant in the same intervention said it is usual in her village to 'shame' women and their families for '(women) sitting in shops interacting with men'.

Impositions of curbs and limits on women's movements start early, observed Delhi-based girl students who partook in a career counselling intervention in their ITI

¹⁵ The Disha project was partnered by IDF and UNDP and funded by the IKEA Foundation. Disha worked by: i) providing career counselling in schools and colleges; ii) establishing collaborative platforms to connect job-seekers and employers; iii) creating networks of mentors to guide starting and growing small businesses; and iv) creating value chain linkages for women producers at the lower end of the value chain to improve value realisation of their produce.

¹⁶ Titled 'Disha entrepreneurship guidance cell (Entrepreneurship Awareness Programme /Entrepreneurship Development Programme)', the intervention aimed to train 3000 and facilitate 1800 women to start and grow existing enterprises. Its primary implementers were Centre for Entrepreneurship Development of Karnataka (CEDOK) and Department of Skill Development Entrepreneurship and Livelihood (SDEL).

organised under the Disha programme.¹⁷ ‘Responsible girls’ from ‘respectable families’ are expected to make education and career choices based on the proximity of opportunities to their homes. So much so that even in the rare case that one finds employment in these job-short times, said an ITI graduate, parental approval will require for it to necessarily be close home, from 9 am to 5 pm, with no night shifts, no fieldwork, have women co-workers, and preferably with the government. The girl added that she chooses to sit at home and do nothing, over struggling to scout for such impossible-to-find jobs that would get her parents’ nod.

Two, fear for physical safety inhibits women and families from seizing work opportunities. Elders, male family members, even older children, disapprove and discourage women from going out for work.

So it is that all market facing activities are strictly restricted to male farmers, pointed out women farmers in Maharashtra’s Yavatmal district; though women are involved from sowing to harvesting.¹⁸ Because markets mean travelling unsafe and uncomfortable distances, in trucks, with produce and cash, waiting in queues at mandis, waiting overnight sometimes, and interactions with male drivers, brokers, traders, labourers.

A similar dread of difficult and dangerous commutes, and unsafe work environs, keeps urban women indoors. Additionally, given that reports on violent assaults on women in the city are on the rise, jobs close home are often the only option for girls. Parental panic levels have in fact zoomed, observed the Deputy Director of the Directorate of Training and Technical Education (DTTE), due to increasingly sensational media coverage on crimes against women.¹⁹ Parents give into the hype and impose stricter bans on their daughters, the bureaucrat regretted.

Meanwhile, even for the few women who find jobs as also their families’ permissions, length and risks involved in travelling are often among the key reasons for quitting eventually. A young girl among 21 women recruited by the Jindal Steel Limited’s (JSL) Rohad-based factory under a Disha intervention,

¹⁷ Titled ‘Quest Alliance, National Capital Territory (NCT)’, the intervention’s objective was to provide women students of Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and polytechnic colleges soft skills training and guidance in defining career goals and finding employment. The intervention also provided placement support. It trained had 10013 women students and placed 2461 at the time of the study.

¹⁸ The women farmers were participants in an intervention titled ‘Promoting women entrepreneurship in Agrivalue chains through the community mobilisation resource centre (CMRC)’. It trained women farmers on post-harvest management practices, and connected them to the supply chain market of agri-commodities.

¹⁹ IDF interviewed the bureaucrat as a key informant to study the intervention titled ‘Quest Alliance, National Capital Territory (NCT)’.

resigned within three months of joining.²⁰ While her reasons for quitting are a complex amalgam of multiple compulsions, the immediate cause as articulated by her was commute. Her brother was already against her job. Some days before she quit, he was witness to two bikers molesting a girl at the neighbourhood bus station. Then, she had an accident while returning from office. Blinded by winter fog and darkness an auto hit her, she fell, hurt herself. These incidents combined to make her family forbid her from going to office.

Oftentimes the ban on commute and travel is self-imposed. Women say they lack the exposure and self-confidence needed to interface with the world outside. Most among Disha's participants have not been further than their village or city, or have grown up in a village and married into another. Not one among the women IDF interviewed in Karnataka's Mandya district had travelled outside her village.²¹ The interviewees were participants in an intervention building the capacity of women artisans and linking them to value chains. The women said they were attending the trainings only because these were being held in villages. The youngest trainee said she knew her family would not allow her to study further or travel out of her village to work. They were planning to get her married within the year.

WFH is a non-option for women, most of who work in manual and temporary jobs

Given the severe social and physical impediments to their mobility as discussed above, women have restricted access to education, skill trainings and income opportunities. It follows then that less than one-fourth of women in the working age group manage to overcome these disadvantages to join the workforce. And, even this meagre participation is sliding south. The 2018 Economic Survey by the Government of India (GoI) notes reduced participation by women in India's labour force.²²

Barring just six per cent of the already few women who work in India, the rest are part of the unorganised sector. They do low level manual work in household enterprises, small units, on land as agricultural workers, as labour on construction sites, domestic work, and other forms of casual and temporary jobs. Research finds the working condition of these women as highly unpredictable and wrought with insecurity, wage discrimination, absence of medical and accidental care, lacking

²⁰ Titled 'The Jindal Stainless Limited (JSL)', the intervention created skill training and employment opportunities for 21 women in the stainless steel fabrication industry, a traditionally male-dominated sector. The training partner for it was Lok Bharti Skilling Solutions (LBSS).

²¹ The women were participants in an intervention titled 'Capacity building for artisans with market linkage pilot – Karnataka'. The intervention's objective was to train 2300 women artisans in Karnataka and connect them to the market. Its primary implementer was IndusTree Foundation and other partners were Srishti School of Art Design and Technology, Mindtree, Sonata Software and NGO Vikasana.

²² Economic Survey, India, 2017-18. <http://mofapp.nic.in:8080/economicsurvey/>

continuity due to seasonal intermittent work, low level irregular patterns of earning and employment, absence of employer-employee relationship and weak administrative structures.²³ Also, more often than not such employment is exploitative. Saradmoni says that women working in the unorganised sector are more at risk of sexual harassment.²⁴ Breman reports that jobs in the unorganised sector make women work till the last stage of their pregnancies and force them to resume work soon after child birth.²⁵ Rao and Suryanarayana draw a link between the entry of younger women into unorganised jobs at export processing zones, to accentuated market segmentation with female dominated jobs being devalued, degraded and least paid.²⁶

As literature indicates, women workers have neither the position nor the power to negotiate a shift in their work location to ensure continuity in employment. They simply cannot shift to a WFH mode to remain employed, as necessitated by the pandemic.

Also, the unskilled, low-level physical nature that characterise the occupations that the bulk of working women are attached to are incompatible with remote working. A study published in the national daily *The Hindu* substantiates this.²⁷ Though the study is gender-agnostic, it shows that WFH is easier adapted by educated professionals with specialised skills, who are mostly in higher level managerial positions. And that WFH is a non-option for lower level job hands hired for work that is manual in nature, like done by 94 per cent women who work in India. The study draws these conclusions by measuring suitability of diverse occupations to work from home in India to understand the implications of the current remote work imperative. A survey of over 3000 workers from over 100 occupations is used to generate an index of suitability of occupations to work from home (WFH) and the need for human proximity (HP). The study finds negative association between the two dimensions — the greater the need for HP, the lower is the occupation's suitability to WHF. So, occupations with highest WFH suitability include directors and, general managers who require minimal HP to do their jobs. In contrast,

²³ Manju, (2017). Women in unorganized sector - Problems and issues in India. *International Journal of Applied Research*, 3(4), 829-32 <http://www.allresearchjournal.com/archives/2017/vol3issue4/PartL/3-4-182-302.pdf>

²⁴ Saradmoni, K. (1995). Crisis in the fishing industry and women's migration: The case of Kerala, in Schenk Sandbergen (ed.): *Women and seasonal labour migration*. IDPAD Sage. New Delhi

²⁵ Breman, (1985). *Of peasants, migrants and paupers: Rural labour and capitalist production in West India*. Oxford University Press. Delhi

²⁶ Rao, P. Shanmukha and N.V. S. Suryanarayana. (2013). 'Issues and challenges of female labour migration'. <http://www.globalrp.org/issues-and-challenges-offemale-labour-migration.html>

²⁷ Mani, Deepa and Tomar, Shekhar. (2020, March 30). Work from Home in the time of COVID-19. *The Hindu*, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/work-from-home-in-the-time-of-covid-19/article31207008.ecehe>

occupations with least suitability to WFH include domestic helpers, salespersons, who need high HP.

WFH as a strategy to cope with the pandemic will double marginalise women

As multitudes log in from their homes to work and employers constitute rules for them to do so productively, it is possible that these WFH practices are here to stay. And might even outlive the immediate battle to combat the pandemic's spread. A recognition that comes along with concerns associated with such a large-scale shift to the WFH mode. Editorials and opinion pieces point out that WFH is not an option for many sectors, including banking, hospitality, media and construction. Lack of network infrastructure, regulatory hurdles and inadequate productivity tools are being seen as key shortcomings.

But, perhaps, our gravest apprehension in adopting WFH in dealing with the current public health emergency and its aftermath should be losing millions of women workers from the country's workforce. Because even as many have taken to meeting deadlines bent over laptops at home, most working women in India simply cannot do so. They have no work if they cannot show up for work.