

Key Points

- Gender norms around work left women more vulnerable to economic losses and restricted re-entry into the labor force.
- The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) shock demonstrates the importance of intentional social safety nets and control over wages within households.
- Skills and knowledge gaps are important factors that restrict vulnerable groups, like women, from accessing existing public resources during shocks.
- Developing digital financial infrastructure allows governments to be better prepared to respond to shocks, and ensuring that women have direct access has important empowerment implications.
- Female migration is more vulnerable to economic shocks than male migration.
- The measurement of COVID-19 recovery through labor force participation alone will mask other gaps and vulnerabilities that emerged, especially for women.

Pathways through the Pandemic: Ways in Which Women Fared in South and Southeast Asia

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1. Women Around the World Were Disproportionately Affected by the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic, Both Economically and Socially

Economically, women were more likely to leave work and had more difficulty in finding new employment (Kugler et al. 2021), resulting in an estimated 13 million fewer jobs for women between 2019 and 2021 (International Labour Organization 2021a). This economic setback was experienced in tandem with greater vulnerability at home, with a higher risk of child marriage (Yukich 2021) and greater exposure to violence within their households. Surveys found that 45% of women experienced intimate partner violence since the outbreak, with unemployed women particularly likely to be subject to abuse (UN Women 2021).

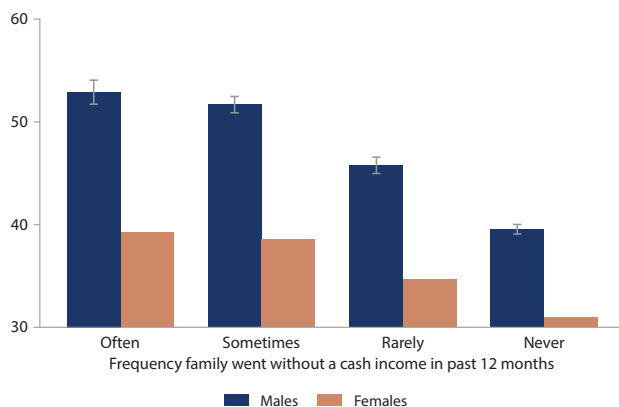
The ebb and flow of normative tides drove the gendered effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Differential market conditions pushed women from employment; women found themselves in more vulnerable roles and in sectors, like services, that were more likely to be negatively impacted by the outbreak and ensuing lockdowns (Asian Development Bank and UN Women 2022). Compounding this force was the disproportionate pull toward domestic duties, as women were more likely than men to increase hours spent on unpaid household labor and had to tend to greater numbers of children out of school, as well as other household members requiring care (UNESCAP 2021).

While many factors, including geographical location, household dynamics, economic status, and access to—and control over—resources, affected the extent to which these forces played out, gender norms were an underlying force driving the pandemic's



unequal effects. Though some may have hoped that income shocks would cause restrictive gender norms to relax, even if by necessity, data suggests that they often regress, concerning around gender-based violence (UN Women 2022), as women become further entrenched in traditional gender roles (UN Women 2020a). In some cases, women entered employment to absorb the effects of household income loss, but this was only temporary (Bansal and Mahajan 2022). Overall, higher unemployment increases the expression of restrictive gender norms. In Figure 1, we show that this is consistent with longer-term World Values Survey data wherein men in households facing greater economic hardship were actually more likely to claim that men should have preferential access to jobs in times of scarcity.

Figure 1: Share Agreeing with the Statement: “When Jobs Are Scarce, Men Should Have More Access Than Women” (%)



Note: n = 179,507.

Source: World Value Survey data for 2010–2022.

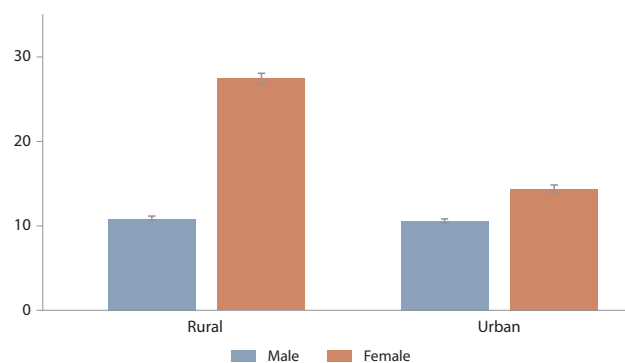
2. Geographic Location and Mobility Had a Significant Impact on Job Losses and Access to Social Safety Net Programs, Impacting Women’s Ability to Cope with Shocks

A wide array of characteristics at the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak predisposed an individual to suffer a larger or smaller economic shock in its wake. Living in a rural or urban area—and mobility between the

two—would prove to have large ramifications in many countries, like India. Although urbanization and worker movement away from agriculture are widely associated with classical models of structural transformation, India’s experience during the COVID-19 pandemic tells a more complicated story of how these trends could impact the country’s ability to mitigate economic shocks in the future. Rural women in India, often considered some of the most marginalized, had access to several levels of protection that mitigated economic shocks, but many urban women were left more vulnerable and isolated. These rural women experienced lower levels of COVID-19 cases (Imdad et al. 2021) and had access to workfare programs and agricultural jobs that softened economic losses. As rural-to-urban migrants returned home to access these layers of protection, the push and pull of normative market and household forces impacted women’s abilities to recover economically.

Social safety nets were a valuable source of protection for rural households, and particularly women, throughout the pandemic. At the onset of the first wave, the government was responsible for employing nearly 30% of rural women (Figure 2) (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2020), mostly through safety nets programs like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which guarantees all rural households 100 days of paid work per year. In FY2020–21, MGNREGS provided work to almost 112 million individuals from 75 million households (Ministry of Rural Development 2021). Coming out of the country’s first pandemic-related lockdown, demand for work under MGNREGS surged to 39 million households (Ministry of Rural Development 2021).

Figure 2: Share of Workers Employed by the Government (%)



Source: PLFS data for 2019–2020; authors’ calculations.

The advantages of programs like MGNREGS were particularly salient where they were well-implemented and complemented with gender-sensitive programming. A study by Inclusion Economics India Centre found that ensuring economically constrained women were paid into their own accounts—and not joint accounts operated by male household heads—and trained on how to use them resulted in higher economic engagement and more liberal gender norms. However, the potential benefits of this program were challenged, as lockdown-induced reverse migration to rural areas increased demand for days, and gender norms pushed limited work toward men. A mandate to maintain gender parity in MGNREGS work provision, however, was able to mitigate the impact of this trend, highlighting the need for gender-intentionality in the design of social protection systems (Sangwan and Sharma 2022).

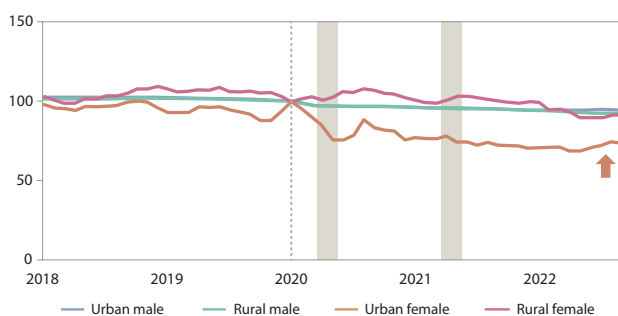
Beyond safety nets, agriculture was able to absorb large amounts of displaced labor in rural areas. While India's other sectors lost 15 million jobs in the course of the pandemic, agriculture was able to absorb 11 million workers (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy 2021). This contributed to rural women across Asia being three times less likely to drop out of the labor force than urban women (ILO 2023). The pandemic affected young urban women, in particular, who were twice as likely to drop out of the labor force than young men (ILO 2021b). Figure 3 shows that as lockdowns passed, these urban women were also less likely to regain employment or pre-pandemic levels of income when compared to men and rural women (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy

2021). Looking at the experience of migrants—a large share of young and urban working women—provides key insights into how the intersection of geography, mobility, and limiting gender norms impacted women's ability to mitigate the economic shocks of the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, domestic migration, allowing labor to flow from rural to urban centers, had been increasingly crucial in expanding access to economic opportunities in many low- and middle-income countries. This was the case in India, where there was a 45% increase in internal migration between 2001 and 2011 alone. While most of this migration occurred within districts, over 45 million migrants found themselves across state borders at the onset of the pandemic as cases rose and the government imposed lockdowns across the country. Many of these men and women, engaged primarily in short-term contract work, found themselves in a vulnerable position and sought to return to rural areas, resulting in a mass exodus from urban centers. Ten million migrants returned to rural villages between March and June 2020 (PTI 2020).

Although migration back to rural areas was able to absorb some of the initial shock for these internal migrants through workfare and agricultural employment, recovery was slow and lagged especially for women, who were pulled further into household duties. Inclusion Economics India Centre worked with state governments in two states in Central and North India to survey 4,644 of these returning migrants across the rounds of lockdowns and subsequent recovery periods. Migrants had difficulty re-entering the labor force, and each round of recovery saw fewer men and women remigrate to urban centers. Women, however, suffered the greatest economic setbacks—being less likely to remigrate or find employment, whether remigrated or not. An earnings gap ballooned in this period, as gender and remigration status severely impacted earning potential in the wake of the pandemic: women staying in rural areas made less than 20% of their pre-pandemic earnings after the second lockdown, while men who had successfully remigrated had recovered to over 80% of their previous wages. While many unemployed women were still seeking work, others found themselves stuck outside of the workforce and trapped in roles delegated to them by gender norms. Women were less likely than men to be seeking work, with the primary reason being their occupation with domestic duties, which in many cases had multiplied in rural areas due to the influx of returned household members (Women in Fisheries Network 2021).

Figure 3: Labor Force Participation by Gender and Geography, Benchmarked to January 2020



Note: Standardized such that January 2020 is equal to 100. At this time, urban male LFPR was 76%, rural male LFPR was 76%, urban female LFPR was 14%, and rural female LFPR was 13%. Income for these groups was ₹11,400, ₹6,800, ₹1,000, and ₹500, respectively.

Source: Data from CMIE CPHS, Ages 15–55.

The act of returning home itself left many migrants in worse-off positions, and this was especially true for female overseas workers returning from abroad. Many Asian countries supply large numbers of international migrants. For example, 11% of the population of the Philippines are migrant workers, many of whom are women (UN Women 2020b). This large group of women found themselves in a precarious position as countries scrambled to close borders, and as many sought refuge in their home countries, they experienced the economic consequences of reintegration into stagnating economies unable to absorb their labor. Underlying this were high levels of debt from a costly journey home and extensive quarantine, as women were more likely to pay the full cost of repatriation compared to their male counterparts (Kang and Latoja). The Government of the Philippines was able to offer a one-off payment of ₱10,000 (approximately \$200) to 536,764 returned overseas workers (Patinio 2021), but reintegration into employment for women remained a challenge as the gender gap in labor force participation increased.

3. Labor Force Participation on Its Own is a Poor Measure of Recovery When We Look at How Women Have Recovered Compared to Men

Although some predominantly female sectors, like ready-made garments production, were able to withstand comparable levels of job losses, many women still experienced income reduction and were exposed to worse working conditions. In Bangladesh, 28% of working women were garment workers in 2020, but the sector represented only 19% of women's job losses—compared with much higher levels for domestic workers (Genoni et al. 2020). This may imply that women working in Bangladesh's garment industry were relatively sheltered from the effects of the pandemic, but a closer examination finds that many employers used the lockdown disruptions to illegally terminate or change contracts, causing women to lose their previously accrued benefits (Islam et al. 2002). For women still working, the quality of employment was degraded as women saw a 43% drop in wages, 10 percentage points more than that of men (Genoni et al. 2020), and experienced increases in threats and violence from male supervisors (Islam et al. 2002).

Questions for Further Exploration

- How do we change gender norms around breadwinning, domestic work, and childcare so that women's economic position is less precarious?
- How do we support safe and sustainable labor migration by women as the world reopens?
- How do we measure the impacts of shocks to reflect how they differentially affect men and women?

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