

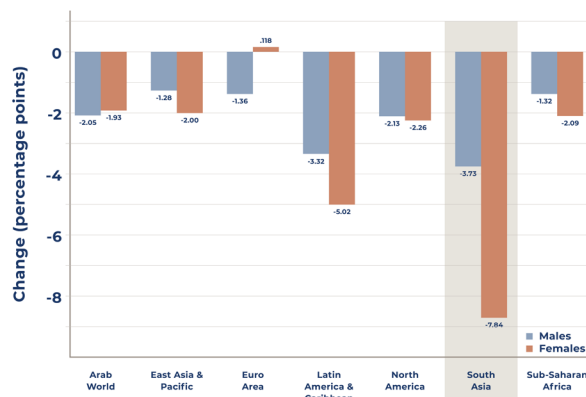
Mahamaari aur Auraton ki Aapbeeti

Women, Ordeal & Opportunity through the Pandemic

Around the world, Covid-19 pandemic-induced economic downturns have disproportionately affected women. The pandemic has led to relatively larger labour force drop-out for women (see figure), and relatively larger losses in female-dominated sectors, including the services. Women with school-age children have been particularly affected, bearing the brunt of additional housework and childcare responsibilities. Alongside, women's reports of domestic violence and mental health deteriorations increased with mobility-restricting lockdowns.

These facts may not be surprising, but they are unusual, since recessions normally hit men's economic opportunities more than women.

Female Economic Activity has Declined Relatively More than Male Activity: Change in labour force participation rates, 2021 compared to 2019



Source: World Development Indicators data on adults (age 15+)

Prior to the pandemic, Indian women were rapidly leaving the labour force, and they consistently participated in the labour force at lower rates than predicted. Indian women's labour force participation declined from 31% in 2000 to 19% in 2021, and is now lower than all other G20 countries, including Saudi Arabia.¹ This pre-pandemic decline was largely driven by a decrease in rural women's labour force participation, while urban women's labour force participation remained low, but stable.

What do we know about how pandemic-related downturns have affected Indian women, and what we can do to better support their economic recovery? 5 Key Facts:

Fact 1: Economic losses through the pandemic have been disproportionately large and persistent for Indian women in urban areas — and the pandemic's long-term consequences for women are not yet fully understood.

Covid has largely affected urban women's economic activity. Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy suggest that 22.1% fewer women were employed in urban India in 2021 compared to 2019. Alongside higher labour force dropout, females have been less likely than their male counterparts to try to find work after they lost or left jobs, often leaving the labour force entirely. In 2021, the number of urban Indian women seeking work had decreased by 34%, while the number of urban men seeking work increased by 20%.²

Although the primary economic impact of the pandemic was felt by urban women, the net effect across India has been significant. Monthly female employment in 2021 was 6.4% lower than female employment in 2019; in contrast, the parallel statistic for males is 1.3%.

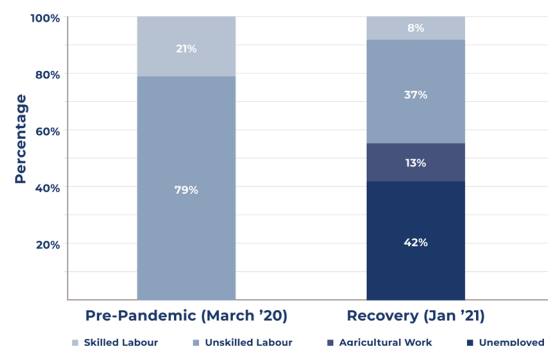
Unfortunately, the long-term consequences of the pandemic are yet to be fully understood. But, India's gender-inequitable context suggests decisions made for young women during this time may have affected women's future well-being. In a survey conducted by Inclusion Economics India Centre of over 2,700 rural households³ in northern Madhya Pradesh, girls under age 20 who were enrolled in school prior to the pandemic are 6 percentage points more likely than their male counterparts to have dropped out of school during the pandemic. Around 21 percent of those female school drop-outs left school to get married, compared to 1 percent of male school drop-outs.⁴

Fact 2: Even women who were formerly "well-attached" to jobs, such as female migrant workers, have struggled to return to work. Higher female unemployment goes hand-in-hand with relatively higher food insecurity.

In 2020 and 2021, Inclusion Economics India Centre⁵ surveyed low-income migrants who worked away from their rural villages prior to the pandemic and returned home due to the first nationwide lockdown in 2020. Across four surveys spanning 15 months, through economic recovery and the devastating Delta wave, we found that former female migrant workers were significantly less likely to be working than their male peers at any point in time.

Former female workers who left their villages again were 13 percentage points less likely than similar males to have worked in the past week; among former migrants that were still in rural villages when surveyed, females were 9 percentage points less likely than males to have worked in the past week. Among women who did work, many transitioned out of skilled work into unskilled work or agricultural labour.

Female Workers Dropped out of Skilled Jobs, Work



After the initial nationwide lockdown, many migrants left their rural villages in search of work again. Former female workers who left their villages only earned up to 65% of their pre-pandemic income at any point up to 15 months after the pandemic began. In contrast, during the period of economic recovery in January 2021, men who left their villages for work earned on par with their prior income.

1 World Development Indicators - see [here](#), accessed June 28, 2022

2 Compared to 2019; all CMIE statistics from <https://ceda.ashoka.edu.in/ceda-cmie-indias-shrinking-female-workforce/>.

3 The team includes researchers from Yale University, Duke University, Harvard Business School, and the University of Southern California.

4 Authors' own calculations of incoming survey data. Results are preliminary.

5 The team included researchers from Yale University, University of Colorado - Denver, University of Michigan, and the University of Southern California.

Unsurprisingly, these employment gender gaps are accompanied by gender gaps in well-being: female migrants were 7 percentage points more likely to report reduced consumption of essential goods in the past month, and scored 6 percentage points worse on a food security index than similar males.⁶ So...what can be done to help women get back to work?

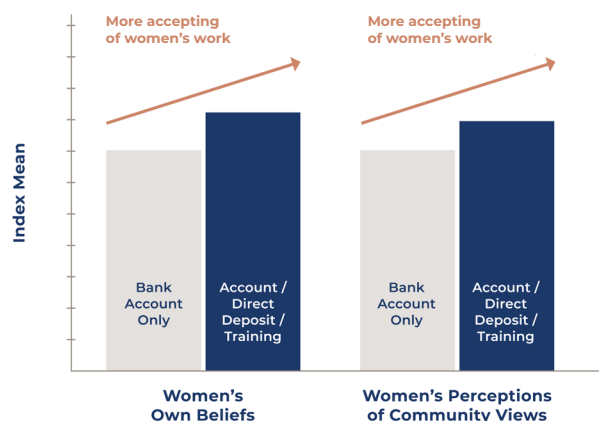
Fact 3: Gender-intentional policy can help women access employment, and even change gender-restrictive views.

Prior research supported by Inclusion Economics India Centre⁷ shows how implementing the government's policy on direct benefit transfers – paying MGNREGA wages into a worker's own bank account – and then training women to access those accounts – leads women to work more, both in workfare and private employment. The policy was straightforward and non-controversial: it ensured that women who worked for the program could directly access electronic workfare payments in their own bank account, rather than channelling funds to the male household head.

Compared to women who were only offered help to open individual bank accounts, those who were additionally offered direct deposit and training in account use worked more for both MGNREGA and the private sector. Following the intervention, these women earned 28% more in private sector employment annually, reflecting women's greater ability to exercise their desire to leave the home to earn their own income.

This study took place in a rural part of northern Madhya Pradesh, India, where gender norms are quite restrictive. In 2017, a little over one-quarter of these women stated they have a say in whether they work for pay outside the home. But the policy itself actually liberalized gender-restrictive views. Several years after this policy was implemented, women who received MGNREGA direct deposit and training were more likely to have a positive view of women leaving the household for work, and perceived lower social stigma to women working.⁸

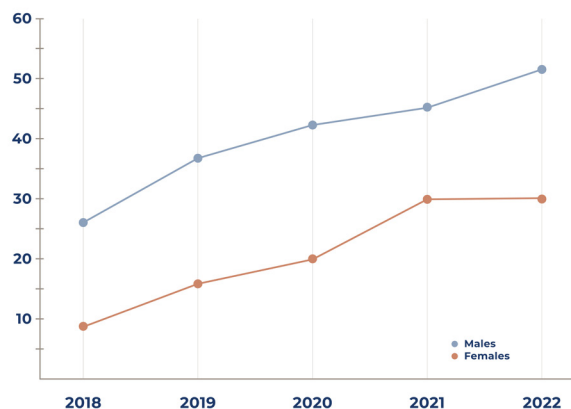
Boosting Women's Financial Control Changed Social Norms



Fact 4: Access to mobile phones could enable women to obtain information about jobs, training, and even remote work. To better support women, India must close its mobile gender gaps.

Many out-of-work women report being willing to take on jobs, but are kept from working far from home due to mobility constraints.⁹ While women's access to technology, such as mobile Internet, has grown over recent years, both economic and norms-related challenges keep women from accessing and using phones.¹⁰ Phones are often considered a threat to unmarried

Recent Mobile Internet Use in India



"Mobile Internet use" refers to use of the internet on a mobile phone in the last three months. Mobile internet users do not necessarily have to personally own a mobile phone. Source: GSMA data.

women's purity and future marriage prospects, and they are viewed as a distraction from married women's core duties to care for their households.

Crucially, India's mobile gender gap has increased slightly through the last year of the pandemic. Government initiatives that aim to link women to phones show promise in reducing access gaps and decreasing restrictive views on women's phone use. **In Raipur, Chhattisgarh, after massive investments in mobile connectivity and smartphone distribution to women, mobile Internet gender gaps have drastically reduced, while acceptance of women using phones has increased.** This evidence is purely correlational, and more research is needed to understand this issue better.

Fact 5: Government initiatives increasingly employ local women as community auditors, health workers, banking correspondents, job recruiters and more. These initiatives could provide critical on-ramps to the labour market.

In 2019, Inclusion Economics India Centre¹¹ partnered with the Bihar state government to understand the challenges and opportunities associated with employing rural, self-help group-affiliated women to audit local social protection programs. Women's employment was enabled as the state rapidly expanded its use of social audits to track and improve local service delivery.

In qualitative interviews, local female auditors reported **being proud of their role supporting local communities and their ability to help rural households.** Many continued their work in hope that the role would become a permanent government position. They reported that the work was challenging because they had to wait a long time before receiving anticipated payments, and had to use personal funds to cover work expenses. They also reported needing additional training to perform their duties well, and difficulty balancing employment with household duties – which often remain their responsibility even while working. Working was particularly challenging when women need to travel long distances and work long hours for audits. Overall, these challenges contributed to relatively high attrition.¹²

As of mid-2022, the Indian government employs nearly one crore females as workers across a variety of programs.¹³ Government efforts to employ women could be a key source of local employment. They can be even more impactful by addressing challenges like payment delays and need for more training, and by finding ways to support women in balancing a variety of responsibilities.

For more information on this research, contact Charity Troyer Moore: charity.moore@yale.edu. For more information on **Inclusion Economics India Centre** and **Inclusion Economics at Yale University**, visit ie.yale.edu.

6 For more, see Allard, Jenna, Maulik Jagnani, Yusuf Neggers, Rohini Pande, Simone Schaner, and Charity Troyer Moore. 2022. "Indian Female Migrants Face Greater Barriers to Post-Covid Recovery than Males: Evidence from a Panel Study"; medRxiv 2022.06.03.22275964; doi: <https://doi.org/10.1101/2022.06.03.22275964>

7 Formerly EPoD India at IFMR

8 Erica Field, Rohini Pande, Natalia Rigol, Simone Schaner, and Charity Troyer Moore. 2021. "On Her Own Account: How Strengthening Women's Financial Control Impacts Labour Supply and Gender Norms." American Economic Review 111(7): 2342-75. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20200705>

9 Fletcher, Erin, Rohini Pande and Charity Troyer Moore. 2018. "Women and Work in India: Descriptive Evidence and a Review of Potential Policies." in India Policy Forum, Volume 15. Earlier ungated version available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3116310#.

10 "A Tough Call: Understanding barriers to and impacts of women's mobile phone adoption in India," with Giorgio Barboni, Erica Field, Rohini Pande, Natalia Rigol, and Simone Schaner. 2018. Available at https://egc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/2020-04/A_Tough_Call.pdf

11 The team also included researchers from Yale University and the University of Southern California.

12 "Scaling Gender-Inclusive Social Audits: Preliminary Insights from Process Monitoring and a Randomized Controlled Trial." October 19, 2021. Available upon request.

13 See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/number-of-women-employees-as-of-july-1-last-year-well-above-number-reported-prior-to-lockdown-govt/article-show/90425478.cms>. Accessed June 30, 2022.

