

Impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on the Employment Status and Income level of Women Domestic Workers in Chennai

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women domestic workers in Chennai through a mixed-methods approach. Domestic workers form an essential yet undervalued segment of the city's informal economy, facing low wages, insecure employment, and limited social protection. The pandemic and ensuing lockdowns magnified these vulnerabilities, leading to widespread job loss, income decline, and social stigma. Quantitative data from 100 respondents revealed that over half experienced temporary unemployment and 80% faced major income reductions. Qualitative interviews highlighted emotional distress, employer mistrust, and exclusion from relief measures. Migrant workers were disproportionately affected due to lack of registration and support networks. Despite hardships, many women demonstrated resilience through mutual aid and informal credit systems. The study underscores the need for inclusive welfare policies, legal recognition, and stronger institutional mechanisms to safeguard domestic workers in crisis situations.

Keywords: Women domestic workers, Informal labour, COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

Women domestic workers constitute a vital yet largely invisible labour force in Chennai's urban economy. They perform essential tasks such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare, thereby sustaining middle- and upper-class households. Predominantly women from low-income and marginalized backgrounds, many are migrants from rural Tamil Nadu and neighbouring states. Their work is characterized by informal arrangements, absence of written contracts, low and irregular wages, and minimal access to social protection. The ambiguous legal status of domestic work within Indian labour law frameworks has left this workforce vulnerable to exploitation, economic insecurity, and abuse. Despite the presence of unions and domestic workers' associations, only a small fraction is formally registered with welfare boards or benefit from labour entitlements. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the subsequent lockdowns in Tamil Nadu exposed and intensified these pre-existing vulnerabilities. Movement restrictions, suspension of public transport, and closure of residential colonies resulted in sudden job losses. Many employers dismissed workers over fears of infection, while others reduced wages or withheld payments. Live-in domestic workers were often confined to employers' homes, facing longer working hours and emotional isolation. In contrast, live-out workers could not access workplaces due to strict lockdown regulations.

Although government relief measures such as ration distribution and cash transfers were introduced, many domestic workers especially migrants and unregistered workers—were excluded from these benefits. Consequently, the pandemic deepened gendered inequalities, pushing several households into debt, hunger, and social marginalization. While national studies have examined the economic and labour market impacts of COVID-19, few have focused specifically on domestic workers in Chennai. Moreover, existing research tends to rely solely on either quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews, limiting the ability to triangulate findings. The present study addresses this gap through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data on income and employment with qualitative narratives of coping, resilience, and recovery. This dual perspective offers a more holistic understanding of the pandemic's effects on women domestic workers and contributes to the discourse on informal labour and gendered vulnerability in urban India.

2. Literature Review

Domestic work in India has long been situated at the intersection of informality, gender, and caste (Neetha, 2013; Banerjee, 2020). Scholars have highlighted how domestic labour remains undervalued because it is viewed as an extension of women's unpaid household work (Chen, 2011). The absence of written contracts and legal recognition further contributes to job insecurity and wage exploitation (Srivastava & Jha, 2021). In Tamil Nadu, the Domestic Workers Welfare Board provides limited benefits such as pension and maternity assistance, but registration levels remain low, particularly among migrant workers. The pandemic exacerbated vulnerabilities in the informal sector. Studies across India reported widespread unemployment, wage losses, and restricted access to relief measures for domestic workers (SEWA Bharat, 2021; ILO, 2022). Research in Delhi and Mumbai found that over 70% of domestic workers lost employment during the first lockdown (Sharma & Thomas, 2021). In their 2022 study, Sultana and Hazarika examine how the COVID-19 pandemic drastically affected the livelihoods of women domestic workers in the Union Territory of Puducherry. The authors highlight that this group, largely employed in informal and unregulated settings, experienced severe job losses and wage disruptions during lockdowns. Many workers were dismissed without notice or pay, as employers feared infection or faced their own financial constraints. The lack of written contracts, social security coverage, and formal recognition within labour laws left these women without any safety nets. Migrant workers and single mothers were particularly vulnerable, facing food insecurity, rent arrears, and growing debt. Despite limited government relief measures, access was uneven due to documentation barriers and lack of registration with welfare boards. The study underscores the urgent need for policy inclusion, welfare support, and social protection mechanisms for domestic workers to reduce gendered economic inequalities and enhance resilience during future crises. However, few studies provide city-specific insights for Chennai, where the socio-economic structure, migration patterns, and welfare delivery mechanisms differ substantially. Furthermore, most existing analyses employ single-method approaches either household surveys or qualitative interviews without integrating the two. These limits understanding of both the scale of disruption and the nuanced lived experiences behind statistical patterns. Thus, a mixed-methods study focusing on Chennai is crucial to capture the complexity of domestic workers' experiences, linking

quantitative evidence of economic shocks with qualitative insights into coping strategies and social support mechanisms.

3. Objective of the Study

1. To assess the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns.
2. To analyse the change in the employment status and income level of women domestic workers in COVID-19 lockdown.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

4.1 Quantitative Component

A structured survey was administered to 100 women domestic workers across ten selected zones in Chennai. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used, facilitated by collaboration with local NGOs and unions. The questionnaire captured socio-demographic information, employment history, income patterns before and during the pandemic, access to welfare measures, and self-reported health and stress indicators. Data were analysed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics and regression models exploring factors associated with job loss, income reduction, and food insecurity. Comparative analyses were conducted between live-in and live-out workers, and between registered and unregistered workers.

4.2 Qualitative Component

In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 domestic workers, representing diverse age groups, residential locations, and employment types. Additionally, 10 key informant interviews were held with union leaders, NGO representatives, and labour officials. The interviews explored lived experiences, coping mechanisms, perceptions of employer relations, and access to institutional support. Qualitative data were coded thematically using NVivo software to identify recurrent themes and patterns.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in Tamil by trained female researchers. Ethical clearance was secured from the host institution's review committee.

5. Findings

5.1 Socio-Demographic Profile

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents reveals that the average age of domestic workers was around 36 years, with the majority falling within the 28–45 years working-age group. This indicates a relatively young and active labour force that forms the backbone of the informal household service sector. In terms of educational attainment, nearly 65% had studied up to middle school or less, while only 10% had completed high school or higher education. Such low levels of education restrict their access to alternative employment opportunities and

perpetuate dependence on low-paying, informal work. Regarding migration status, about 70% were migrants from neighbouring districts, while 30% were local residents. Migrants were found to rely heavily on informal social networks—friends, relatives, or agents—for finding work, reflecting the absence of formal recruitment channels. In terms of marital status, 78% were married, 12% widowed, and 10% single or divorced, showing that a majority of these women bear family responsibilities. The average number of dependents per worker was three, which amplifies the economic strain when income is disrupted. Additionally, 60% lived in slum tenements or informal settlements, where overcrowded conditions and poor sanitation heightened their vulnerability to health risks during the pandemic.

5.2 Pre-Pandemic Working Conditions

Before the onset of COVID-19, domestic workers typically worked in 4–6 households per week, averaging 5–6 working days. Most were part-time, live-out workers, juggling multiple employers to sustain their income. Their average monthly earnings ranged from ₹8,000 to ₹15,000, depending on the number of households they worked for and the nature of the tasks performed. The employment relationship was entirely informal, as none had written contracts or formal terms of engagement. This complete absence of legal protection made them highly vulnerable to sudden job loss and exploitation. Furthermore, less than 5% were registered under the Domestic Workers' Welfare Board, leaving the majority without access to social security benefits, health insurance, or pensions. Such precarious pre-pandemic working conditions exposed the fragile livelihood base of this labour segment.

5.3 Impact of COVID-19 on Employment and Income

The COVID-19 pandemic had a severe and immediate impact on the employment and income of domestic workers. During the initial lockdown, 50% of the respondents became completely unemployed for one to two months, as employers suspended household work due to infection fears. The income decline was widespread, with about 80% reporting a loss of at least half their earnings between April and June 2020. Many employers reduced wages, discontinued services, or delayed payments, pushing workers into acute financial distress. A particularly worrying trend was the permanent job loss reported by 20% of the workers, as some employers permanently terminated their services, often citing fear of contagion or cost-cutting measures. This highlights how the pandemic deepened existing job insecurity in the informal domestic labour market, with little to no safety net to cushion the shock.

5.4 Stigma, Employer Behaviour, and Commuting Challenges

Beyond income loss, domestic workers faced heightened social stigma and discrimination during and after the pandemic. Around 40% were denied entry to workplaces because they lived in areas designated as “high-risk zones” by Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) and gated communities. These restrictions reflected deep-seated class and spatial biases that equated poverty-stricken neighbourhoods with contagion. In addition, 35% of the respondents reported rude or mistrustful behaviour from employers after the pandemic. Many workers felt blamed for spreading infection and were treated with suspicion, damaging the previously informal yet trusting relationships they had built over years. Commuting also became a major

challenge: 60% faced difficulties due to the suspension of public transport, and 45% reported increased travel costs once limited services resumed. Longer travel times and higher transport expenses further reduced their net earnings, compounding their economic hardship. Collectively, these experiences underscore how the pandemic not only disrupted employment but also intensified social exclusion and everyday struggles for this vulnerable workforce.

6. Discussion

The findings underscore the intersectional vulnerabilities faced by women domestic workers in Chennai. The pandemic not only disrupted livelihoods but also exposed structural inequities rooted in informality and gender norms. The limited reach of welfare measures points to gaps in policy implementation, especially for unregistered and migrant workers. The study reaffirms the need for formal recognition of domestic work under labour laws, greater welfare board outreach, and targeted emergency support mechanisms. The integration of qualitative insights reveals how informal networks and women's collective agency played a vital role in survival, despite systemic exclusion. These findings contribute to broader discussions on informal labour rights and the feminization of urban poverty in post-pandemic India.

7. Conclusion

Women domestic workers in Chennai bore a disproportionate share of the socio-economic burden during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their experiences highlight the fragility of informal employment systems and the urgent need for comprehensive policy responses. Strengthening legal frameworks, expanding welfare board coverage, and ensuring inclusion in future crisis-response programs are essential to protect this critical yet marginalized workforce. By combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, this study provides a holistic account of how the pandemic reshaped domestic labour relations and offers actionable insights for building a more inclusive and resilient urban labour policy.

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