

STRUGGLES OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN INDIA DURING COVID19 PANDEMIC:

A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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“Women are the largest untapped reservoir of talent in the world” ...Hilary Clinton

BACKGROUND:

About 48.9% of the population in India are women. Among which 14% are entrepreneurs running various types of businesses, 35% are directors of start-ups. However, India stands least in the world where women are engaged in paid jobs which is about 23% and that sharply contrasts with the rate of men i.e. 78%. A range of factors hinders the opportunities for women to enter employment in our country. Factors such as social patriarchy, female domestic responsibility, entrenched cultural expectation where women are forced to stay at homes. If it all they worked it would be on an informal basis without secured wages and contracts, a luxury that men usually obtain. This scenario being a backdrop, the idea of women entrepreneurship in India has numerous challenges. Women are considered to be irresponsible if they step forward to run a business or do a start-up since setting up a business requires a significant amount of effort and time outside normal work (looking after the household).

Women earn only 80% of what the male employees earn in any field for the same work men do. This is mainly due to the domination of male in labour force. Women spend 577% more time on unpaid domestic work than men, nevertheless, few outliers and path breakers have formed their own enterprises and businesses.

With patriarchy running alongside development, women struggle to step forward to become entrepreneurs. Corona virus disease 2019 (COVID19) pandemic outbreak and pan-India lockdown 2020 has added burden to the already existing problem in women entrepreneurship.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is beyond belief. It has put governments in a dilemma, standstill situation for businesses, most of all it has exposed the cracks in social and economic systems of Indian community that prioritises corporate profit and defence expenditure over health, education and social welfare. As COVID-19 began to capture the globe impacting individuals, families, and economies, the impact this would have on the businesses run by women entrepreneurs, their lives and economic independence is unimaginable.

IMPACT OF COVID19 ON WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN INDIA:

About 20% of micro enterprises, 5% of small enterprises and <3% of medium enterprises in India are owned by women. Economic downfall, after-effects of the pandemic and pandemic-induced lockdown has been hard on them.

Besides the lost lives, the covid19 pandemic of 2020 leaves a permanent mark in history for the global lockdowns it has triggered. Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) has been affected due to the lockdown in India. This is distressing as India's 6.3 crore non-agricultural MSMEs that

had employed 11 crore people, will now bear the major impact of the lockdown. Many experts predict that it will take months or even years to combat the after-effects of lockdown on the revenue. COVID-19 brought many small scale businesses to a standstill. Many women entrepreneurs went from having a good business to having almost no income.

Severity of impact: A study among women entrepreneurs revealed the challenges faced by them. About 93% of respondents stated that they had already been negatively impacted by COVID-19 and 4% stated that they haven't been impacted so far however have foreseen a negative impact in the days to come. Among those who have been affected, temporary and permanent cessation of operation was 44% and 3% respectively. About 76% of the participants requested additional support.

Some of the affected sectors were beauty, hospitality, travel and tourism, construction, logistics, energy, real estate, telecommunications, medical and pharmacy, and utilities.

ADAPTION AND INNOVATION UNDERWAY:

Many women have been pivoting, adapting and re-purposing their businesses in the short term, with some already anticipating the implications of COVID-19 in the longer term. Due to the diminishing revenue, some are already in the process of venturing new ideas to develop business and generate income. The pandemic and the lockdown have paved the way for women to think out of the box and find new ways to operate, produce and deliver. They have started focusing on new technologies and are trying to make the best use of technology and internet world; however, for rural women entrepreneurs it is still be a dream.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES:

In order to survive COVID-19 and rebuild their business subsequently, women are seeking to expand their online and digital skills, predominantly around marketing, and their planning and resilience approaches and skills. Thereby, leading to an increase in innovation and diversification of business model and products. It is well known that access to networks is critical for women entrepreneurs and this has to be more importantly reiterated.

STEPS TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT:.

Trade, import and export for MSMEs: Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP) is one of the government's initiatives to enhance women entrepreneurship. It has invited start-ups owned by women and small businesses that can obtain or supply raw materials for masks and provide it to home-based women workers to make masks as an alternate source of income. NITI Aayog, in collaboration with WEP has started this initiative 'Masking it up with WEP' to support women workers who have suffered losses and have been hit hard due to Covid-19.

The economic difficulties that have ensued due to the pandemic can be defeated by this program and would help women workers cope-up with the decrease in revenue. It would also help the community in combating the shortage of surgical and reusable cloth masks. WEP plans to aggregate women start-ups and small businesses with the capability to supply raw materials and give out cloth masks made by women workers across the country.

The government's stimulus package has made it clear that there should not be any harm to the real economy and to the entrepreneurs of India. The Government of India, under the model of "Aatma Nirbhar Bharat" had announced soft landing of the economy and has ensured a growth in the Indian economy through financial packages. However, it is important to

take into consideration the seriousness of the impact that the pandemic has caused on the economy with regards to sustainability of micro and medium industries. The government should come up with holistic approach to uphold women entrepreneurs. Special policies and financial policies for women entrepreneurs in India is need of the hour. Women entrepreneurs are in need of working capital post pandemic and lockdown so as to mitigate production, rent and salary. Loans with concession in rate of interest must be given to women entrepreneurs for expansion and modernisation of their already established businesses. GST has to be removed for micro and small business as it serves as an additional burden. Most importantly rural women entrepreneurs need special attention during policy making as they suffer the most in times of commotion and turmoil.

WAY FORWARD

Rapidly creating and repurposing resources to reinforce women's competencies and skills to respond to the current situation must be the priority. Women entrepreneurs have to be trained in such a way that they are able to face the crisis and are well equipped to rebuild their futures. Webinars must be conducted and training materials must be freely available with practical advice for women entrepreneurs. Trainings on how to manage cash flow, using social media as a medium to access new markets and how to write business plans must be conducted.

Some measure to enhance women entrepreneurs:

- Creating and bolstering networks like Self-help groups (SHGs), so that women are able to connect with each other to gain support and access to resources.
- Providing additional support to Mentors to guarantee that they can provide increased rustic support to mentees.

- Conducting webinars exclusively for women entrepreneurs and having global audience in it.
- Providing additional training on personal resilience, business diversification, business resilience, financial management, online marketing, e-commerce and more.
- Partnering with MNCs and corporate to deliver additional marketing resources.

Financial support – Women in both urban and rural India face financial difficulties in running businesses, tough times like pandemic and lockdown can be overwhelming and add financial burden to women entrepreneurs in both rural and urban setup. Therefore, they need financial support, access to investors, and other material goods such as machinery and vehicles.

Social protection – It is a saddening truth that there is insufficient social protection and support for MSMEs throughout India. Hence, government should take measures to provide social protection for women entrepreneurs in urban and rural India.

It is important to see what is unseen and to reach the unreached because enhancing women's lives not only enriches her family but also the community, the country and the whole world.

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