A Marxist Feminist Discussion on Female Labour Force Participation and Intra-household Dynamics in Post-Pandemic India

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Abstract
Unpaid domestic labour performed by women within the household premises, along with the institution of family as a whole, is crucial for the functioning of capitalism. The interplay of patriarchy and capitalism has contributed to the perpetuation of women’s subordinate position in the family and the labour force. Consequently, the pandemic had a more intense impact on women. In this study, we propose possible scenarios regarding post-pandemic labour market decisions of women engaged as formal as well as informal workers in the pre-pandemic situation. Further, we explore the changes in their intra-household dynamics, which include the prevalence of domestic violence, as consequences of these decisions. Marxist feminist theory along with relevant data and newspaper articles has been used to look into how each of these scenarios will influence the process of surplus value extraction.

Keywords: Marxist feminist, coronavirus pandemic, female labour force, domestic labour, domestic violence
1. Introduction

The concept of family is based on the sexual division of labour, such that the unpaid labour of women in the family helps to sustain the male workers’ social reproduction (Menon, 2019). This enables capital to claim a larger part of the value of labour power of the workers at the workplace (Hensman, 2011). Moreover, even when women are engaged in paid economic activities, they are often employed in low-skilled, low-paying and sex-segregated jobs with limited upward mobility (United Nations [UN], 2020). The subordinate position of women in the household in a patriarchal society leads to an inherent docility among them, which benefits capitalism in the labour market since they are less likely to unionise to improve upon their lower wages and poor working conditions (Ghosh, 2018). Therefore, capitalism benefits from unpaid labour of women within the household premises as it helps to extract greater surplus value from the male workers, and also when they work outside their households where social norms of patriarchy have conditioned them to accept low paid segregated jobs. This has led to scholars arguing that social norms of gender roles not only furthers the motive of capital accumulation, but is also essential in holding together both the institution of family and the capitalist economy (Menon, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a severe blow to the Indian economy which has been experiencing low growth rates since 2015, declining share of wages, increasing contractualisation and casualisation of the workforce, and declining female labour force participation rates (Abraham, 2013; Abraham & Sasikumar, 2017; Kapoor, 2020). Economic distresses generally impact women the most (UN, 2020). This can be owed to the interplay of capitalism and patriarchy which relegates them to low-paying segregated jobs, lacking security of employment and savings. Surveys show that significant percentages of female street vendors, domestic workers, construction workers and home-based workers have suffered a severe cut in their incomes during the lockdown period (Chakraborty, 2020; Kaur et al., 2020). Moreover, health workers, majority of whom are women, have been able to retain their jobs which are risky and hazardous, with low and irregular remuneration (Deshpande, 2020).

When we look into the household dynamics during the pandemic, women are also affected by the prevalent sexual division of labour. For women engaged in economic activities, there has been an intensification of ‘double burden’ particularly during the lockdown, owing to lack of domestic help, closure of schools and anganwadis, and increased care of the elderly (UN, 2020). While a shift towards more equal share of housework between men and women has
been observed, patriarchy has ensured the persistence of a significant gender gap in household work (Deshpande, 2020). Further manifestations of female subordination are indicated by notable increases in domestic violence (Samantroy & Sarkar, 2020). Past experiences show that an exogenous shock to the economy can bring about a shift towards greater equality within the households, but they can also cause a ‘prolonged dip’ in female labour force participation (FLFP) unlike that of men (Deshpande, 2020; UN, 2020).

Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) in India has consistently stayed low and has declined over the years. The lockdown induced by the pandemic has worsened the condition of females, both within and outside the household premises. In this context, this paper attempts to analyse the interplay of capitalism and patriarchy during the pandemic, and its likely impact on FLFP and the changes in household dynamics in the post-pandemic scenario. We propose possible scenarios regarding post-COVID labour market decisions of both formal and informal women workers, and explore the changes in intra-household dynamics as a consequence of these decisions. Marxist feminist theory has been applied to understand how each of these scenarios will influence the process of surplus value extraction. We limit our propositions to married women since 80.3 percent of the women belonging to the working age group of 15-59 years are married (Census, 2011).

The paper is divided into six sections. In the following section, we review the theory pertinent to the Marxist feminist view of domestic labour, and specify the theoretical framework of our discussion. In section three, we briefly talk about the employment scenario among women in the pre-pandemic situation. While section four discusses the different scenarios that might arise pertaining to labour market participation decisions, section five analyses the intra-household dynamics in each of these scenarios. Section six concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework

Arguably, the earliest inspiration of most Marxist feminist literature was Engels’ work, ‘The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State’ He believed that oppression of women stemmed from the possession of private property, and was linked to the engagement in the production process. Accordingly, the advancement of capitalism, with the subsequent entry of women in the sphere of production, was expected to create a contradiction within the institution of family because the wage-earning woman would no longer be a property of the husband. This would fade away the monogamous family, and consequently male dominance. Marxist feminist
scholars have criticised Engels and other orthodox Marxists who focused exclusively on class and failed to adequately explain the crucial role of domestic labour of women in the reproduction of labour power. Instead of doing away with patriarchy, capitalism has in fact used the same for its advancement and the two have reinforced each other (Hartmann, 1979).

Domestic labour of women creates use-values and helps in the production of surplus value through the process of creating the labour power of men (Dalla Costa & James, 1975). Thus, unpaid labour of women lowers the cost of hiring workers, enabling capitalists to extract higher relative surplus value by reducing the value of labour power of workers (Ghosh, 2018; Himmelweit & Mohun, 1977; Holmstrom, 1981). Capitalism also benefits from family as an institution which provides the ideology for unequal wages, unequal job opportunities and job segregation. Such ideologies make women workers an important part of the industrial reserve army, as they are often considered dispensable (Himmelweit & Mohun, 1977). It is beneficial for capitalists to employ women because it helps to drive down the overall value of labour power, their value of labour power is lower than that of males, and they can be paid lower wages than their value of labour power. A major purpose of capital that women serve, whether it is by working within the domestic premise or working as a waged labour, is to counteract the tendency of the falling rate of profit (Beechey, 1977). Additionally, women play a crucial role in psychologically maintaining the labour power by absorbing general tension in the family (Dalla Costa & James, 1975; Gardiner, 1975; Seccombe, 1974).

Households have been interpreted by some scholars as a distinct mode of production, whereby women form a separate class altogether. Benston (1969) compares the unit of family with the pre-industrialist economic unit, and states that domestic labour in the capitalist system is still in its pre-capitalist stage. Delphy (1977) argues that the capitalist mode of production is independent of the patriarchal mode of production. This understanding has been criticised by Holmstrom (1981), Molyneux (1977) and Himmelweit and Mohun (1977).

Scholars have also debated on whether domestic labour is productive, and whether it creates value. On one hand, both Holmstrom (1981) and Seccombe (1974) maintain that since domestic labour is not exchanged and hence, has no direct relationship with capital, it is unproductive and does not produce surplus value. Seccombe states that women are oppressed by their husbands within the household, but not exploited, and Holmstrom claims that women as domestic workers perform uncompensated surplus labour, and are thereby exploited by both their husbands and the capitalists. On the other hand, there are scholars who argue that domestic
labour does produce value (Dalla Costa & James, 1975; Delphy, 1977). In fact, Gardiner (1975) criticises Seccombe by stating that his assertion of no surplus value created by the wife assumes that she receives the value equivalent to her labour, and that fails to explain power differences in marriages. However, Himmelweit and Mohun (1977) argue that domestic labour cannot be technically categorised as either productive or unproductive work. Accordingly, the debate as to whether it is productive in the Marxist sense, is irrelevant in the context.

However, Molynuex (1979) critiques the domestic labour debate, accusing it of economic reductionism, and of focussing narrowly on only the labour performed within the domestic premises and neglecting the work associated with rearing children. She argues that not only does the determination of the value of labour power vary across time, culture and category of workers, but it is also dependent on a host of other factors, like the level of accumulation, the level of technology, etc. Domestic labour, therefore, plays a small role in determining the value of labour power. The debate has rather oversimplified the relationship between capitalism and domestic labour, and has failed to acknowledge the historical and cultural aspect of the same.

In our study, we follow Hensman (2011) in positing that domestic labour creates value in the Marxist sense. Labour-power is a commodity that is sold in the labour market, and domestic labour is a part of the production process of this commodity. Therefore, according to the Marxist labour theory of value, domestic labour produces value. Hensman (2011) argues that it may be theoretically possible for domestic labour to not produce any surplus value. But often, due to power differences in marriage, a significant part of her labour is not compensated for, and this is especially the case when there are small children in the family (Gardiner, 1975). Thus, it can be asserted that it is most commonly the case that the domestic labour performed by women in their household produces surplus value. This surplus labour benefits the husbands as personalised housework is being done for them, and the capitalist since it lowers the value of labour power of the male workers (Hartmann, 1979). Hence, women are exploited by both husbands and capitalists.

3. Pre-COVID Female Labour Force Participation in India

India has one of the lowest female labour force participation rates in the world (Andre et al., 2017). Even when it witnessed high economic growth, it was not accompanied by an increase in FLFPR (Das & Desai, 2003). Accordingly, the most popular feminisation hypothesis which establishes a U-shaped relationship between economic development and FLFPR, fails to hold in the case of India. Abraham (2013) shows that de-feminisation of the labour force has in fact
been taking place since the 1970s. Apart from ad-hoc spurts in FLFPR, particularly in the rural areas which is brought about mainly by agrarian distress, there has been a secular decline in both FLFPR and share of females in the labour market. Scholars have attempted to put forth a host of reasons to explain not only the consistently declining FLFPR but also the sudden increases noted over certain periods of time in the same (Andre et al., 2017; Rangarajan et al., 2011). Three particular observations stand out in this regard - household income strongly influences FLFPR such that an increase in incomes leads to a fall in FLFPR, there is generally a decline in FLFPR with an increase in educational qualification, and decrease in FLFPR is associated with a corresponding increase in engagement of women in household and allied activities (Abraham, 2009; Das & Desai, 2003; Kannan & Raveendran, 2012).

Each of these observations can be traced to patriarchal norms of the society according to which males are expected to be the primary breadwinner of their families through their engagement in paid economic work, while females are relegated to a subordinate position who are supposed to be economically dependent on males and remain within the household premises, and undertake all the unpaid household chores and care work (Ghosh, 2018). These norms reduce women to secondary workers, such that they engage in paid work only to compensate for lower household incomes when the male members are either unemployed or earn insufficient wages. Thus, they are a part of the ‘added worker effect’ during any kind of economic shock (Chaudhary & Verick, 2014). One such example is the significant increase in rural FLFPR in India during the period of 1999-2000 to 20004-05. The agrarian distress at that time led to the migration of rural males to urban areas in search of work, while females were ‘distress-driven’ to work in agriculture in their place (Abraham, 2009). After the crisis period, when rural households witnessed an improvement in their household incomes, females withdrew from the labour force. Thus, while a negative relationship is observed for rural females with respect to Monthly Per Capita Expenditure, the same for urban females is mildly U-shaped, with the curve flattening out in recent times (Abraham, 2013). The decline in FLFPR is observed to be associated with an increase in participation of females in household allied activities like collection of fuelwood, water, care work, etc. (Ghosh, 2018). This substitution of paid work with unpaid household work by females is a reflection of patriarchal norms which restrict and make them solely responsible for household chores and care work. The first two observations are seen to hold even with an increase in the educational qualifications of women. In spite of an increase in female enrolment in higher education, there is no subsequent increase in FLFPR. This is owed to two particular reasons -the degrees which females hold are deemed
unemployable since they are overrepresented in non-technical fields of education, and higher educational qualifications serve to improve only their marriage prospects such that the presence of an educated woman enhances the status of the husband and his family (Abraham, 2013).

Capitalism uses such patriarchal norms effectively to further its objective of profit maximisation through greater surplus extraction (Ghosh, 2018). These norms are reproduced in the labour market where we observe that much of the low-skilled and low-paying jobs employ women. Gender-based job segregation in a capitalist labour market has resulted in the majority of women being employed in the informal sector as casual or self-employed workers (Das & Desai, 2003). Moreover, as argued by Hartmann (1979), by dominating the choices made by women with respect to the field of education, patriarchy and capitalism limit the kind of jobs available to them, that is, paid activities which are extensions of care work they are otherwise responsible for within household premises. The Period Labour Force Survey data of 2017-18 shows that in the occupation of nursing, 84 percent of the workers are female, and in that of pre-primary teaching 83.29 percent of the workers are female; whereas, 70 percent of the workers among health professionals including doctors are males, and among college, university and higher education teaching professionals 61.79 percent of workers are males. Accordingly, higher reservation wages and ‘double burden’ often lead to non-participation in the labour market by educated females even when they wish to engage in paid economic activities.

Capitalists often increase their surplus value extraction from female workers through the imposition of piece-rate wages, which increases the intensity of labour and in turn, reduces the necessary labour time provided (Marx, 2004). This form of wage controls workers’ intensity because it is in their interest to provide more of their labour to complete the allotted task, thereby also reducing supervision costs of the employers, and is most common for home-based workers, most of whom are females (Harriss-White & Gooptu 2001; Kapadia, 1997; Mies, 1981; Srivastava & Srivastava 2010; Sudarshan & Bhattacharya 2009). Outsourcing or subcontracting work to home-based workers, serves the purpose of capital by lowering costs, as well as of patriarchy since women remain within the household premises (Carr et al., 2004). A number of case studies in India have found that in sectors like mining, textile and prawn processing, female labour is used as cheap labour for traditionally inferior but crucial jobs (Baud, 1983, 1991; Banerjee, 1991; Lahiri-Dutt, 2006; Varghese, 1999;). While male workers
receive time-based payments, female workers are employed on a piece rate basis in some of these industries.

Thus, vertical discrimination and horizontal discrimination through wage gaps prevent any upward mobility of female workers. Lower wages paid to women is justified on the grounds of their dependence on husband’s wages for the reproduction of their labour (Beechey, 1977). These discriminatory practices against female workers enable capitalists to extract higher surplus value, while lower wages paid to them simultaneously reinforce patriarchy, ensuring that they remain subordinate, secondary workers, economically dependent on men.

4. Propositions Regarding Post-pandemic Female Labour Force Participation

We have looked into the pre-pandemic condition of female employment in India in the previous section, and attempted to connect it with the functioning of capitalism and patriarchy. In this section, we make certain propositions about the labour market decisions of women in the post-pandemic scenario. We have broadly divided the women into those who were employed as informal workers, and those who were employed as formal workers in the pre-pandemic economy.

4.1 Women who were employed as informal workers pre-COVID

Workers in the informal sector are essential for the functioning of capitalism, as they are an important source of surplus value extraction. Absolute and relative surplus value can be extracted from these workers, and their lack of income or job security, pensions or any benefits, and workers union facilitates this process (Barnes, 2012). With regard to informal self-employed workers, surplus value appropriated through inter-locked contracts (De, 2017). All these factors add to the social context of patriarchy to ensure that female informal workers are oppressed not only because of their disadvantageous class position but also because of their gender.

During the lockdown period, a significant portion of female informal workers have been adversely impacted (Shabnam, 2020). While casual workers were deprived of their wages and remained unemployed, the self-employed women have lost their livelihoods (Kaur et al., 2020). With most of the low-skilled and low paying jobs employing women, the lack of availability of casual employment and loss of income is expected to affect women more severely than their male counterparts (UN, 2020). The situation is, however, different for health workers who have
witnessed an increase in their burden of work due to the pandemic (Daniyal, 2020). Among them, the informally employed health workers like the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers suffer greater exploitation due to longer working hours for the same wages. There have also been issues pertaining to delayed payment or non-payment of their wages (Kasliwal, 2020).

Such state of affairs will compel these women to participate in the labour force in order to compensate for lower household incomes. Thus, we posit that females who were employed as informal workers in urban areas will be ‘distress-driven’ to seek employment, a phenomenon which has been commonly observed for females in rural areas until now (Abraham, 2009). Moreover, loss of livelihood of self-employed women is expected to lead to a surge of casual workers since many of them may not afford new investments after exhausting their savings. In rural areas, women are also at the risk of becoming bonded labourers against the money they have had to borrow to meet household expenses.

The recent flexibility of labour laws and continuous movement towards higher privatisation will cause a further intensification of the process of surplus value extraction by capital, especially by increasing the process of informalisation. In the post-pandemic situation, therefore, the interplay of capitalism and patriarchy will relegate the women informal workers to the lowest quality of jobs of the most precarious nature. The increased vulnerability of these women arises from their class position and their gender position. The expected surge of casual workers will swell the docile reserve army of labour which will be advantageous to the capitalists in their process of accumulation. Accordingly, while female home-based workers are likely to work at a lower piece-rate, female casual workers might be employed at lower wage rates. This ensures greater exploitation and hence, higher surplus value extraction.

4.2 Women who were employed as formal workers pre-COVID

Here, we shall discuss the LFPR of formal women workers who usually come from middle and high income households. Although an increase in ‘double burden’ holds for all women, this class of women were faced with higher burden due to the discontinuation of services provided by domestic helpers, particularly during the lockdown. We have further divided this class of women into two broad categories—those who retained their jobs during the pandemic, and those who did not. As we shall see, each of the cases entail manifestations of patriarchy and the associated ideology of gendered division of labour.

4.2.1 Women who retained their jobs during the pandemic
Initial reports suggest that work from home (WFH) has made working hours longer and work itself more intensive during COVID (Green, 2020). In the post-pandemic economy, WFH can be the new norm in workplaces. Accordingly, contracts and working conditions of employees may be adjusted along the lines of piece-rate and increasing demands for meeting and reporting of work to adjust for the monitoring that earlier used to take place in office spaces. While this is a common norm among informal female workers, we predict a movement towards informalisation of employment of formal workers which will enable firms to extract greater surplus value from the workers at lower costs.

Although the new work arrangement holds for both the husband and the wife, patriarchal norms make the latter solely responsible for household responsibilities which include taking care of the elderly and children. This reduces the leisure time and hence the necessary labour of these women, leading to an increase in the surplus value extracted from them. Thus, as pointed out by Hartmann (1979), patriarchy and capitalism will be working simultaneously in reducing the value of labour power of women. It will fall not only on account of the change in the nature of work, but also due to greater involvement in unpaid household activities.

**4.2.2 Women who lost their jobs during the pandemic**

Studies show that there exists an inverse relationship between engagement in household and allied activities, and participation in paid economic activities (Ghosh, 2016). Correspondingly, it can be posited that the recent rise in the burden of household activities has a gendered effect on unemployment, that is, women are more likely to either quit or be laid off.

According to Indian Human Development Survey [IHDS] (2011-12), approximately 51 percent of females reported that the decision of their participation in paid work is made by their husbands; while the percentage of females belonging to an income category who are ‘allowed’ to work consistently decreases as one moves up the income class\(^1\). Accordingly, the decision of the woman to join the labour force after the pandemic will be taken by the household based on certain aspects. As already discussed, domestic labour of women generates surplus value which is directly extracted by the husband and other household members, and indirectly extracted by the capitalist who employs the husband. The difference between this surplus value extracted from her domestic labour during the pandemic, and her expected wages after the pandemic.

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\(^1\) We have used the variable termed INCOME5 as constructed by IHDS-II (2011-12).
pandemic, along with the husband’s employment situation will influence this decision-making process.

*Case I: Husband lost his job during the pandemic*

In such a scenario, both the husband and the wife look for a job, with the first one to be hired accepting it. It must be noted that the sequence of either of them getting hired will influence the subsequent decision of engaging in paid work by the woman. For example, if the husband gets the job first, the wife may or may not continue her job search. Since household income is an important determinant of female labour force participation (Chaudhary & Verick, 2014) and the husband is supposed to be the primary wage earner, it is expected of her to discontinue her job-search if his earnings are sufficient for the household. Conversely, it is expected of the husband to continue his job search even if the wife gets hired.

Capitalism makes use of patriarchal ideology at the heart of the institution of family to employ women for low-skilled and low-paying jobs (Dalla Costa & James, 1975; Holmstrom, 1981), such that when the wife is the sole earner, she may have to work over-time or take up multiple jobs to meet household expenses. The justification of employing females at lower wages is based on the assumption that they are dependent on their spouse’s wages for reproducing their labour (Beechey, 1977). This patriarchal approach makes it beneficial for capitalists to hire women at wages lower than the value of their labour power.

In this case, the subordinate position of the woman, coupled with the vulnerability of the family caused due to the unemployment of the male breadwinner may also compel the woman to work a higher number of hours, which is a primary way of increasing absolute surplus value extraction. Accordingly, the wife will be producing both use value and exchange value, with her surplus value appropriated directly both by the capitalist employing her and the husband through her engagement in unpaid household activities.

*Case II: Husband remains employed*

The need to look for a job by the woman is lesser than in the previous case since the primary breadwinner of the family still has his job. The wife’s participation in the labour force will now depend on the relation between the surplus value extracted from her within the household during the pandemic, and her expected wages from participating in paid economic activities after the pandemic. If expected wages are greater, the household members will want the woman to participate in the labour force. In the process of her job-search, she will maintain similar
preferences as in the pre-COVID scenario, which include shorter distance to workplaces, availability of crèches, maternity benefits and more flexible hours of work. But the overall job search in the economy will increase in the post-pandemic situation due to high unemployment (Varma, 2020). Consequently, such preferences will make her less desirable as an employee, and her job opportunities will be limited. If at all she is hired, she will be producing both use and exchange values as that of in the above mentioned scenario, and her surplus value will be appropriated by both her employer and her husband.

On the other hand, if surplus value extracted exceeds expected wages, the household will decide against the participation of the wife in the labour force. The increased participation of women in household work and their consequent withdrawal from paid work satisfies the dominant preference associated with cultural norms, whereby women are expected to work only within the household premises. This, along with the predisposition of women’s paid work being secondary and inferior, leads the household to decide that it is more beneficial if the wife continues with her domestic labour instead of participating in the labour market. The decision also emanates from the fact that restricting the woman to working only in the household might lead to discontinuation of the maid’s services altogether, thereby cutting down on their expenses. Thus, in this case, it will be increasingly difficult for these women to opt for work because that would involve going against the decision of their families. Accordingly, they will cease their job search. She will be responsible for the production of only use-value and the surplus value produced by her will be appropriated directly by the husband and other household members and indirectly by the capitalist employing the husband.

5. Propositions Regarding Intra-household Dynamics

We have divided women broadly on the basis of them being employed as formal workers and informal workers. In the following sections, we shall propose some intra-household scenarios that are likely to arise in the post-pandemic situation. Along with the state of surplus value extraction, we also focus on domestic violence inflicted on women. IHDS (2011-12) data shows that irrespective of whether women are engaged in paid work, at least 85 percent of them reported that incidences of violence by husbands is common in their communities.

5.1 Intra-household dynamics of female informal workers

Loss of jobs, incomes and livelihoods of a significant fraction of female informal workers during the lockdown period will have a considerable impact on household dynamics. The
vulnerability of these families has not only led to withdrawal of their children from schools but has also compelled out-of-school children to take up menial jobs in order to support their household expenses (Ara, 2020; Mazumdar, 2020). Since children form a docile, distress-driven labour force who are willing to work at extremely low wages and hazardous conditions, it is beneficial for capitalist accumulation, because it helps them to lower their costs and extract higher surplus value.

Moreover, the reproduction of patriarchal norms in the labour market and poor economic conditions of their households may compel the female children to engage as domestic workers in their own household, producing use value, or in someone else’s household, producing exchange value. The domestic burden being carried out by the mother and the daughter essentially ensures the subordinate position of women in the household across generations. The latter’s engagement in unpaid household labour entails surplus value extraction by the other members of the family directly, and by the capitalist hiring the parents indirectly.

An extreme manifestation of patriarchy within the household premises is through domestic violence. Domestic violence, and psychological abuse inflicted by the adult male member of the household on his wife and children are ways in which they try to exercise control over their partners (Adams, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Initial reports suggest an increase in incidences of domestic violence during the lockdown (Samantroy & Sarkar, 2020), which may continue post-pandemic as well, either because the husband is unemployed or his wages are insufficient to meet household expenses. Difficult working conditions and financial insecurity, which are likely to characterise the lives of the working class in the post-pandemic situation, can contribute to an increase in domestic violence (Kurz, 1989). Female docility associated with the structure of family benefits capitalism since the wife is used as an outlet of frustration faced by the husband at his workplace, which ensures the psychological reproduction of the labour power of the male worker (Dalla Costa & James, 1975; Seccombe, 1974).

5.2 Intra-household dynamics of female formal workers

In section 4.2 we discussed the various scenarios that can arise with respect to labour force participation of female formal workers. Corresponding to each of the cases, this section discusses the probable household dynamics of this class of women. We posit two broad post-pandemic scenarios in this regard, one where the wife quits her job search and another, where she either retains her job or joins the workforce.
5.2.1 Women who quit their job search

Since the wife exits the labour force, she works exclusively within the household premises. The sexual division of labour gets intensified because of greater participation of the wife in unpaid household activities than in pre-COVID times. As explained in Case II of Section 4.2.2, if the household decides against hiring a maid post-lockdown, then the surplus value of domestic labour undertaken by the wife is extracted directly by the husband and other household members and indirectly by the capitalist. In fact, surplus extraction by the husband is now higher than it was before the pandemic.

However, in other cases, the burden of domestic labour performed by the wife may be reduced if a maid is hired. Although the overall working hours of the wife decreases, surplus value will now be extracted by the husband from both his wife and the maid. What we will observe is a shift from intra-class to inter-class appropriation of surplus labour. The exploitation of the maid will operate through the channels of irregular working hours, low pay and sexual harassment (Barnes, 2012).

Ceasing her job search might influence the position of the women in the household, and consequently the control mechanism employed by the husband on the wife in two ways. One, the inability to contribute to household income might deprive the wife of her participation in household decision-making. Relegating her to a subordinate position is further strengthened and the economic dependence of the wife on the husband may increase the incidences of domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Two, since the wife satisfies the dominant norm of restricting herself to household premises, she may earn herself some bargaining power by ‘doing gender’, that is, conforming to gender norms (Mabsout & Van Staveren, 2010).

5.2.2 Women who either retained their jobs or join the workforce post-pandemic

While it is possible for WFH to become a new norm, it is also possible for designated workplaces to function over time. The household dynamics of employed women will be influenced by not only the employment status but also the work environment of both the husband and the wife. Accordingly, there are few scenarios that can arise but irrespective of the case, the woman continues to suffer from ‘double burden.’ In the subsequent cases, we shall also see the prevalence of domestic violence which may increase for the reasons cited below.
Case I: Both husband and wife return to their designated workplaces

In this case, we revert to the pre-COVID scenario where the wife continues to suffer from ‘double burden’ irrespective of whether the household avails some domestic help.

Case II: When husband remains unemployed in search of a job and wife goes out to work

Until the husband is hired, this scenario is a breakdown of the norm of a male breadwinner. This can be manifested by an increase in the male participation in household work, as observed during the pandemic (Deshpande, 2020). However, since the woman is no longer financially dependent on her husband, it may challenge his dominant position. As domestic violence has often been understood as a method to legitimise the dominance of the head of the household (Straus et al., 1980), to re-establish his dominant position, he may resort to inflicting violence on his wife. Thus the upsetting of the power hierarchy may lead to higher incidences of domestic violence. A perceived failure of the husbands to fulfil their hegemonic masculinity is likely to increase domestic violence (Kumar et al. 2002). This is similar to the finding of Silberschmidt (2001) who found that in East Africa, men tend to over emphasise their masculine behaviour of violence to compensate for their economic disempowerment. The insecurity and frustration of the husband which stems from the inability of being the primary earner in the family might cause him to establish his dominance by exerting his power and control over his wife through violence.

Case III: Husband continues WFH while wife goes out to work

Working within the household, whether paid or unpaid, has been a common phenomenon for women (Deshpande, 2020). Accordingly, working within the household is associated with femininity while working outside is associated with masculinity. In this scenario, there is a change in the work environment of both the genders, with a move towards feminisation of the husband’s work. Thus, we observe a change in the sexual nature of employment, where the man’s work is feminine and the woman’s work is masculine, which yet again challenges the patriarchal norms that previously dictated the household environment. Similar to the previous case, the feminisation of the husband’s work may be perceived by the husband as his failure to adhere to hegemonic masculinity. This deviance from norms might lead the husband to exert violence on his wife, in order to compensate for his compromised’ masculinity.

In both Case II and Case III, because the wife is engaged in employment outside the household premises, the husband may accuse the wife of neglecting the role she is conventionally assigned
to, that is, household and care work. IHDS (2011-12) data shows that this is an important reason which drives domestic violence - 49 percent of women who are engaged in paid activities reported that it is common in their community for husbands to beat their wives for such a reason. This figure drops to 35 percent for women who are not engaged in paid activities.

Case IV: Both husband and wife continue WFH

Continuance of WFH ceases the clear demarcation of workplaces from the household, which was stark in the pre-COVID scenario. According to this setup, the wife would resume her subordinate position in the household irrespective of the position she would hold in her office. Now, WFH holds for both the husband and the wife. Thus, along with the feminisation of husband’s work as in Case III, the wife will have to maintain her position at work and at home, both within the household premises. It is possible that the difference in these two positions will cause friction and that may lead to domestic violence.

6. Conclusion

In our study, we put forth a number of possible scenarios that might arise with respect to labour force participation and associated household dynamics of women in post-pandemic India. This has been placed in the broad context of our capitalist economy, and following Hensman, we have discussed the effect on surplus value extraction for each case.

The downturn in the economy, reinforced by the pandemic, is expected to distress-drive females to work in both rural and urban areas. This will lead to a surge in total labour force, with females engaging in casual employment at even lower wages and piece-rates. The continuance of double burden with changes in the nature of work and work environments will lower the value of labour power of women. In a scenario where the male breadwinner has retained his job and the surplus value extracted from the woman exceeds her expected wages, the household may decide against her joining the labour force, thereby conforming to the predisposition that females are a status symbol of families and are hence, secondary workers. In most cases, reduced necessary labour of females will enable higher surplus value extraction within the household premises or outside.
Intra-household dynamics will also differ depending on whether the female is informally or formally employed, with domestic violence inflicted on them a common phenomenon. For the class of informal women workers, it is most likely that their children, particularly the girl child, will discontinue their education. Higher labour force of children, who will also act as added-workers, will serve the purpose of capital through lower wages and greater surplus value extraction. While this scenario is unlikely for formally employed female workers, the reasons for being inflicted upon with violence will range from compromised masculinity ideas due to unemployment or change in the work environment of the male breadwinner to conflicting roles of the employed woman at her workplace and her subordinate position within the household.

The exploitation faced by workers in capitalism gets intensified for women, because of the adherence to patriarchal norms both within and outside the household premises. Accordingly, our study explains that crises like the pandemic adversely affect women in varied ways. The lockdown period saw an increase in men’s share in household work, which may be a step towards greater equality for the long-term. Moreover, as suggested by the UN, policies undertaken to ameliorate a crisis situation like the ongoing pandemic needs to have gender-specific provisions.

Our study comes with the limitation that we have not analysed the impact that the pandemic is likely to have on further divisions within women, that is, on women belonging to deprived caste and religion. Future works may consider these aspects and theorise different post-pandemic scenarios.
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