



WEBINAR 1

COVID, Migration and Women Workers in Eastern India



📅 July 30 Friday ⌚ 4:00 - 5:30 pm IST 📺 On ZOOM

Sakshamaa is supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

Webinar Report

Background

Sakshamaa, an initiative of **Centre for Catalyzing Change (C3)** and **Xavier Institute of Social Service (XISS)** jointly organized a Webinar on '**COVID, Migration and Women Workers in Eastern India**' on July 30th 2021. About 250 practitioners, academicians, students, bureaucrats and policy leads joined the webinar.

The webinar was part of **Sakshamaa-XISS Webinar Series 2021** which is a manifestation of XISS and Sakshamaa's commitment to build networks and work in collaboration for improving the socio-economic conditions of people from marginalised communities, including women workers, living in the low income states of eastern India. It would be helpful to register here that, as per NITI Ayog's report for 2020-21, three out of six low income states of India are located in the eastern part of the country and adjacent to Chhattisgarh, the poorest state of the country. NSSO (2014) data also show that proportion of people living in poverty is comparatively higher in these states. The low income states of eastern India are also known for poor development and gender development indicators and very limited livelihood opportunities. These states had emerged as, what Andre Gunder Frank would call, the "satellites" of industrializing and urbanizing colonial Bengal and continue to be the prime labour sending states of the country.

Recent research shows that along with the caste-class-gender lines, COVID pandemic has also deepened regional divides. In case of India, available evidence suggests that states of eastern region have experienced the greatest brunt of the COVID crisis. Women and girls living in societies with substantial gender gap are often compelled to face greater vulnerability during socio-economic emergencies and pandemics and the gendered effect of COVID pandemic in India, especially in the states of eastern India, had been increasingly apparent. The pandemic had a devastating effect on already shrinking work opportunities for women living in India, especially in low income states with high labour outmigration.

The Sakshamaa-XISS Webinar Series intends to create scope for discussing the specific economic challenges faced by poor women in eastern India and also underscore the significance of gender segregated data on the pandemic's effect on women workers in the region. Sakshamaa and XISS believe that the Webinar-Series will provide an opportunity to learn from available evidence and research and promote a culture of evidence based policy formulation for creating economic opportunities for women in eastern India.

Webinar 1: COVID, Migration and Women Workers in Eastern India

The two-hour webinar began with a key note address by Fr. (Dr.) Joseph Marianus Kujur, S.J. (Director, XISS-Ranchi). In her opening remarks, Dr. Aparajita Gogoi (Executive Director, C3) briefed about the webinar series and its objectives. She also discussed the trend of increasing migration for work among women and the factors determining their work participation. While setting the context of webinar, Dr. Yamini Atmavilas (SPO, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), touched on impact of COVID-19 on migrant women workers' participation in the workforce, draft migration policy, and other ongoing developments pertaining to migrant policy.

The webinar combined two presentations with a facilitated panel discussion of experts from government, academia and apex agency promoting social justice and human and labour rights. The presentations included:

The Impact of the Covid-19 Crisis on Rural Youth from Bihar and Jharkhand by Bhaskar Chakravorty, and Clément Imbert from University of Warwick & JPAL SA

Prof Clement Imbert and Mr Bhaskar Chakraborty, presented evidence on the short and long-term impact of the first COVID-19 wave on India's rural youth. They reported the stark differences in impact of COVID for men and women. While many male workers took up informal employment, most female workers simply dropped out of the labour force altogether. There is a strong need for dedicated policies to ensure employment among youths, especially for rural females.

COVID, Migration and Women Workers in Jharkhand by Johnson Topno, PHIA Foundation

Mr. Johnson Topno, Regional Head of Programme, Phia Foundation highlighted the lack of employment, low income and other economic reasons which pushed females, especially from rural areas, to migrate to urban zones of the country. This transition exposed rural women migrants to extreme vulnerabilities with regard to their dismal conditions of work in the informal sector. The Jharkhand State Migrant Control Room, which is functional since 27th March, 2020, addresses the challenges faced by migrant workers and also works for their grievance redressal. The Control Room has been established under the Department of Labour, Employment, Training and Skill Development, Government of Jharkhand and is being managed by PHIA Foundation.

The presentations were followed by a panel discussion in which panelists primarily focussed on: effective migrant labour policy; recognising migrant women workers in labour market; Chhattisgarh State Migrant Workers Policy 2020 and its outcomes; and creating an enabling environment for female migrant workers.

The Panel included:

Professor Priya Deshingkar (Professor, University of Sussex, UK)

Mr Alex Paul Menon, IAS (Commissioner, Department of Labour, Government of Chhattisgarh, India) and

Dr Neha Wadhawan (National Coordinator, Work in Freedom, ILO, India).

The exchange highlighted several key aspects of migration and women workers in Eastern India including:

- importance of collecting gender segregated data
- real-time response to migrants returning home
- gender barriers and migration specific discriminations among women workers
- recognition of women migration
- need of financial inclusion of migrants
- state specific migration policies
- targeted skilling and enhancing localised opportunities and
- enhancing cooperation among states for interstate migration

Key Messages

- Migration among women has been increasing over years. Internal migration is getting feminized as more women and girls are seeking higher education, skilling and economic opportunities through migration.
- Women have been migrating in family units since decades, in many cases they work together for income. Solo migration for work among women has been increasing over years.
- Women migrants often face discrimination and inequalities, generally in all stages of migration. COVID pandemic related impacts exacerbated gender inequalities and vulnerabilities for them despite government efforts through public distribution system, Direct Benefit Transfer, and MGNREGA.
- Lack of database on migrant workers, scarcity of economic opportunities, labour regulation related challenges make situation worse for migrant workers. Available evidence show that women are more likely to drop out of work and continue as unemployed. Men who lost job opportunities went into informal sector, while women were pushed out of the informal sector and subsequently from the workforce.
- Migration preference – preference to look for a job outside their home state remained similar for men, however for female it is declining.
- The definition of ‘migrant’ needs modification as it is not limited to inter-state migration, several workers including women do intercity movement in search of work or to pursue education. A large number of workers migrate for employment, education, other facilities on their own (without contractor).
- At present, proper identification of migrant labourer is not happening in both formal and informal sector, including the Building & Construction sector. Data gaps are even observed in formal sector labour databases. Because of this migrant workers fail to access social security schemes and welfare entitlements.
- Along with women migrant workers, informal sector, which is dominated by women workers, also calls for attention of the policy makers and other concerned institutions.
- Building a credible database of migrants is critical. The ongoing initiative of portal to create data base for migrants is a welcome step which will have provision of voluntary submission of data by self- employed persons coming to the destination state.
- Chhattisgarh, through its labour resource centre within state and migration resource centre outside state, has been extending support to migrants and their families.
- Along with lack of skills, lack of understanding on labour rights make migrant communities more vulnerable. Providing them with Legal, Constitutions and Financial literacy can save them from exploitation by employer.
- Our cities often are not welcoming to migrants. Women migrating for work are generally at risk of exploitation and they are often marginalized and excluded within the urban development management discourse. Rather than telling women not to migrate, it is pertinent to reduce risks associated with migration and create a supportive environment.
- The economic and migration system need to be gender responsive. The migration policy must recognise the rights and agency of women. The state specific migration polices must recognise women migrants and address their specific needs.
- For the promotion of women’s, including migrant women’s, workforce participation, it is important to provide women workers decent work opportunities at both source and destination. For supporting women in jobs, improving work conditions is critical.
- Targeted skilling programmes for unskilled and semi-skilled women workers can facilitate their re-entry in jobs. Various government skill-initiatives are extending job-skilling and upskilling programmes for reconnecting migrants to work. The skilling programmes need to be market oriented to gauge emerging opportunities.