Webinar Report

Centre for Catalyzing Change (C3) under its Sakshama initiative and XISS Ranchi jointly organized a Webinar on ‘Young Women’s Transition to the World of Work in Eastern India’, on September 2, 2021. This webinar is second in the Sakshama-XISS Webinar Series 2021, which is a joint endeavor of C3-Sakshamaa and XISS to build networks and encourage dialogue in order to work towards improving the socio-economic conditions of marginalized communities, especially women workers living in low income states of eastern India.

The Webinar panel comprised four eminent speakers:

- **Professor Arup Mitra**, Professor, Institute of Economic Growth
- **Ms Nancy Sahay**, IAS, CEO, Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society
- **Dr Orlanda Ruthven**, Technical Lead, Population Council, Delhi
- **Ms Kanchan Parmar**, Social Development Specialist, World Bank.

More than 185 participants, including development practitioners, academicians, researchers, decision makers and other relevant stakeholders participated in the webinar.

The one-and-a-half-hour virtual consultation began with a formal welcome by Dr. Raj Shree Verma (Assistant Professor, Rural Management Programme, XISS, Ranchi) followed by a welcome address from Professor Himadri Sinha (Programme Head –Rural Management Programme, XISS, Ranchi). In his address, Prof. Sinha shared his views on the profound impact of COVID pandemic on employment of women, and growing invisibility of young women in the labour market, especially in Eastern India. He emphasised the need for targeted action to facilitate the safe transition of women back to the workforce.

In her opening remarks, Ms. Madhu Joshi (Senior Advisor, Gender Equity and Governance, C3) shared how the pandemic induced crisis also limited youth’s ability to pursue education, undertake skilling, and search for employment. Ms. Joshi highlighted that the female labour force participation in India has been trending down for the past several years, leaving us among the lowest in the world. There is a growing gender gap in employment and inequalities despite improvement in access to education, she mentioned.
Employment of a large percentage of females are in self-employment (53.4%) and casual work (24.7%). It indicates labour market’s inability to provide gainful employment to women and ensure that they are neither underemployed nor engaged in low productivity jobs.

Amongst regular/salaried female workers, 66.5% had no formal job contract with their employer; almost 54% got no paid leave; and 50% worked without social security benefits.

Agriculture continues to be the mainstay of more than 50% of women despite the declining trend in agriculture. Within this sector, women perform varied roles like that of agricultural laborers and other unpaid work on family farms.

COVID-19 has been termed as the "job-killer of the century". A large majority of the income earning jobs which women were engaged in were lost. In terms of employment status, the worst affected are informal sector workers. Women working as own account workers, helpers in household enterprises, regular wage/salaried workers without job security, casual laborers with low wages and no safety net etc. are the worst affected because of economic slowdown resulting from the Covid-19 outbreak.

Even when India is moving towards the phases of unlocking the chances of reviving their employment are still bleak. Women working in the organized sector (for example in education and health or IT sectors) may be less affected as they can work remotely and deliver the services through telecommuting. But ,a beautician or a hairdresser or a waitress cannot do that even if they are employed in the organized sector. Therefore, women in the lower rungs of the services sector are the hardest hit.

Resilience has become an integral part of job preparedness in post-COVID context. Women need to be not only trained but also learn to be flexible and adapt and take initiatives to prepare themselves to join/re-join and sustain in the workforce.

With increased urbanisation, the rural-urban discontinuum tends to decline and rural women might get more opportunities to work even without migrating.

Presentation by Professor Arup Mitra (Professor, Institute of Economic Growth)
In his presentation, Professor Arup Mitra quoted Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Room of One's Own’ which asserts two mechanisms: ‘property rights’ and ‘access to resources’ for women’s empowerment. Prof Mitra offered an overview of the variations in work force participation (WFP), specially female WFP, in rural and urban segments across Indian states. He emphasized that there is a strong relationship between female labour force participation rates and the process of economic development.

The key points from the presentation of Mr. Arup Mitra are as under:

- Employment of a large percentage of females are in self-employment (53.4%) and casual work (24.7%). It indicates labour market’s inability to provide gainful employment to women and ensure that they are neither underemployed nor engaged in low productivity jobs.

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Following the presentation, inputs from panel members focused on young women and girls’ school to work transition and enhance their capabilities for finding sustainable employment. The panel mainly discussed changing world of work, increasing role of digital technology, youth’s transition from school to work, need to promote sustainable livelihoods and emphasized over the need for adopting tested strategies in the low resource settings of eastern states.

Following were the key messages shared by the panel members:

**Ms. Nancy Sahay, IAS, CEO Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS)**

- Since the outbreak of COVID pandemic, digital technology has played a massive role in youth’s transition from school to work and also in promoting sustainable livelihoods. JSLPS also facilitated several young women’s preparedness for work in future as the government is aiming to bridge the gender digital divide.
- Increased automation and farm mechanisation led to large scale job losses among women, including shortage of corresponding employment opportunities for girls, transitioning from school to work.
- JSLPS has been building confidence and positive attitudes among rural women of Jharkhand and upgrading their skills through Rural Self Employment Training Institutes (RSETI). JSLPS also provides training and financial assistance to women entrepreneurs for their economic independence.
- JSLPS also connected farmers to the consumers using innovative technology. For this purpose an android phone based application called Aajeevika Farm Fresh has been created. It helps women self help groups to directly deliver fruits and vegetables to consumers without any intermediation.
- JSLPS has been also implementing digitization of SHGs using internet enabled tablets. Earlier SHG records were kept in hardcopies which often delayed data submission and analysis. Presently, Tablet Didis maintain records digitally and share data on a real-time basis.

**Dr. Orlanda Ruthven, Population Council**

- COVID 19 has deepened the gender divide and it has been a global phenomenon. Sharing experiences from Odisha and Bihar, Dr Orlanda Ruthven elaborated on how various paid and unpaid responsibilities and gender norms influence young women’s work preparedness in these states and strategies that work to overcome the situation.
- Dr Ruthven added that gender norms are very tenacious in India, particularly in low income states like Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand. A recently conducted baseline survey findings from 'Going to School – Get a Plan Project' in Bihar show some gendered views of both male and female:
  1. 35 percent of school going adolescent boys and girls shared that the main reason women should work after marriage is to take care of their household and it should not be for her financial independence or to pursue a career.
  2. Nearly 30 percent of participants feel women should not work outside her home role once they are married.
- Migration of young girls for work can give them more freedom, lead them to achieve greater political awareness, and give them space to challenge gender norms.
- Women are not prevented from working just because of domestic load, it is also related to the status of family in the society.
- Safety of working women is a genuine practical concern; it is also a kind of euphemism for the risks perceived of giving women more freedom, mobility and choice.

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Girls and women from eastern India have been facing an array of vulnerabilities including health and income shocks. The COVID pandemic showed that women are disproportionately represented in paid jobs and they often lack access to social security net.

Businesses are becoming more customer centric. With labour market changes there is an emerging need for a diversified pool of human resources. Human resource management in the public sector is going to play an important role in promoting women employment.

As of yet, there is no state level or central agency or governance framework which is responsible and accountable for the female labour force participation agenda. We have a plethora of well designed schemes for women empowerment, but often they are implemented in silos. There is an apparent policy leadership vacuum.

There is an apparent need for institutional support and policy leadership in enhancing women’s economic participation, collaborating with the private sector, investment in data collection that lead to evidence based policies and incentivizing investment in human capital.

1. In respect of policy design and implementation perceptive, the possible solutions for smoothing transition to work can be categorised into three buckets: Institutions: States need to operationalise convergence at the ground level; enhance private sector engagement for promoting women employment; also identify innovation that targets women employment and scale them up.

2. Information: Targeted investment is needed for gathering high quality data which will empower our policy makers and administrative officials for evidence based policy design and implementation.

3. Incentives: Central government as a policy maker can incentivise states to invest in human capital. Many states of India are doing noteworthy work in this regard. For example: The Government of Andhra Pradesh is investing in early childhood education; in West Bengal KanyaShree Prakalp is showing good results.

The webinar was coordinated by Dr Raj Shree Verma, Assistant Professor, XISS, Ranchi and vote of thanks was given by Dr. Anamika Priyadarshini, Lead- Research, Sakshamaa, C3.