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Gendering Work from Home: An Analysis of the Visible and Invisible Women Workforce in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	03
2. QUESTIONING PARADIGMS: PERCEPTION OF SPACE, GDP, AND CENSUS	04
3. FORMAL WORK SECTOR: WOMEN, VIRUS, AND WOES	06
4. INFORMAL WORK SECTOR: WOMEN, VIRUS, AND WOES	08
5. WAY FORWARD	10
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY	12

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INTRODUCTION

Phrases like 'remote work' or 'work from home' are primarily found in conjunction with the pandemic-induced 'new normal'. It is generally assumed that the origin of the work-from-home employment relationship lies solely in the pandemic. However, when evaluated from a gendered perspective, work from home emerges as neither a novelty nor a temporary make-shift stint to facilitate social distancing protocols. For women, the concept of home as a workstation has been a long-standing patriarchal reality.

The realities of employment and working conditions differ for women employed in the formal sector from those engaged in the informal sector as well as along the intersections of social categories of race, caste, and class. However, the aforementioned idea of domestic space as a site of labour is a constant for most women regardless of their employment status. Given the overarching patriarchal family structure, women are expected to undertake unpaid labour¹ within the household than men. Women make up 60% of unpaid family workers and 98% of domestic workers (Mehta 2000: 27).

Traditionally, for women employed in the formal work sector², a clear distinction has existed between the remunerated work performed in a public setting and the unremunerated work in the private or household sphere. For women engaged in informal work,³ namely domestic work, work on family subsistence farms, care work, etc., home is often the site for both remunerated and unremunerated work.

The perception of space as something private or public alongside the nature of activities performed, whether remunerated or unremunerated, creates different employment expectations for women and men. The pandemic and the resulting containment protocols have worsened this divide. While women employed in the formal sector are witnessing a blurring of boundaries between paid and unpaid work responsibilities, those working in the informal sector are witnessing a loss of employment altogether. This article aims to explore this divide in the context of both formal and informal women workers and highlight the need for policy intervention to bridge the resulting gaps.

QUESTIONING PARADIGMS: PERCEPTION OF SPACE, GDP, AND CENSUS

In terms of law and policy-making, liberal democracies consider the private sphere or the space within the home a personal space. Personal is likened with informal and, thus, conveniently excluded from legislative and macroeconomic deliberations. This renders the space within the household unregulated and open to exploitation.

Feminist scholars like Phillips (1991) have long asserted that ‘personal is political’ as an absence of regulation that leaves women vulnerable to the stresses of patriarchal family order. The organisation of work within the private sphere is structured to promote male engagement in the public sphere by reducing that of women’s (ibid.). Women are actively involved in sustaining the process of ‘social reproduction’, that is, the creation of social bonds, essentially through care work (Fraser 2016: 30). This social reproduction is in turn necessary for a social organisation of the economy, polity, and culture, without which the State cannot function (ibid.). In a sense, nation-states are built on the foundation of women’s unpaid care work.

¹ Unpaid domestic labour, performed overwhelmingly by women, constitutes maintenance of the household. This consists of contributing to activities like cooking, cleaning and shopping, providing care to dependents (children, elderly, sick family members, etc.), and any other voluntary services rendered to the family without any monetary expectations (Singh and Pattanaik 2020: 4).

² Formal work sector refers to the sector that guarantees fixed wages and working hours.

³ Informal work does not guarantee fixed wages and working hours.

A key feature of capitalism is its separation of social reproduction from economic production (ibid.). As a result, the former comes under the category of unremunerated work and the latter under the category of remunerated work. This is evident from the invisibility of women's unpaid work from the calculation of the Gross Domestic Product [GDP] and census data.

The monetary value of unpaid care work either figures in the GDP calculations in approximations or is wholly excluded. Household work resulting in the production of goods, such as the collection of firewood for cooking, subsistence-oriented food production, etc., is considered a part of the 'production process'. However, its value only occurs in estimations in the overall GDP calculation, owing to the lack of parameters along which such a form of work can be concretely quantified (UNDP Human Development Reports 2016). Moreover, the account of unpaid time and labour devoted to the care of family members, ailing, elderly, children, etc., is entirely omitted from the calculation of GDP. According to rough estimates, such unpaid care work makes up almost 39% of the Indian GDP (ibid.).

As per the 2011 Census, a worker was "a person whose main activity was participation in any economically productive activity. Such participation could be physical or mental in nature. Work involved is not only actual work but also effective supervision and direction of it. It also included unpaid work on farms or in family enterprise" (Labour Bureau 2014: 1). Maithreyi Krishnaraj (1990: 2664) has pointed out that the definition of a worker, on which the National Census functions, is market-oriented and more suited to advanced industrial economies with a well-established system of wage labour. Though unpaid work on farm and family enterprise are accounted for, this definition, by putting greater emphasis on 'production for exchange', invisibilises a large chunk of non-monetised and non-market work such as care work and household management (ibid.).

For instance, the National Census classifies women workers into five broad categories. These are female main workers, cultivators, agricultural labourers, household industry, and other workers (Labour Bureau 2014: 9).

Table 1: Percentage of Female Main Workers to Total Female Population under Broad Categories - 1981 to 2011

Census Year	Percentage to Total Female Population				
	Female Main Workers	Cultivators	Agricultural Labourers	Household Industry	Other Workers
1	2	3	4	5	6
1981	13.99	4.65	6.46	0.64	2.24
1991	15.93	5.51	7.05	0.55	2.82
2001	14.68	5.11	4.51	0.95	4.11
2011	25.5	24.0	41.1	5.7	29.2

According to the data in table 1, the census neatly compartmentalises female workers according to their contribution to the money-oriented production for exchange. As per this data, women involved in the household industry in 2011 constituted a mere 5.7% of the total women workers. However, such data grossly underestimates the fact that many women engaged in the household industry are also agricultural labourers, cultivators, and female main workers. Moreover, the criteria of household industry only takes into account the production for exchange and thus discards the unpaid labour of women, amounting to, as stated earlier, roughly 39% of the GDP.

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a massive dip of 24.4% in the GDP at its outset. This dip was coupled with a 9.3% increase in rural poverty and an 11.7% increase in urban poverty (Dhingra and Ghatak 2021). The dip had a considerable impact on the livelihood and working conditions of women employed in both the formal and the informal work sectors. The impact was largely intangible in terms of data and was therefore hardly figured in official reports.

FORMAL WORK SECTOR: WOMEN, VIRUS, AND WOES

The pandemic has disproportionately affected women and men in terms of health-related and socio-economic concerns. Before we discuss how the movement of work inside the home affects women, it is necessary to account for women for whom 'work from home' is a luxury. While the fatality rate from COVID-19 is 60-80% higher for men than women, women constitute almost 70% of the healthcare force (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020). This statistic includes frontline workers, thereby highlighting a clear linkage between women's work and vulnerability to the virus. Moreover, given the shift in priorities and reallocation of resources towards tackling the pandemic, the dwindling access to sexual and reproductive healthcare has severely impacted women's health (United Nations 2020). Despite their greater involvement in the fight against the virus and disproportionate access to resources, women constitute a mere 24% of policy and decision-making bodies for COVID-19 (Rakshit 2021). Only 20% of the World Health Organisation's [WHO] emergency committee members are women (ibid).

The movement of work inside the home produced significant tensions between the remunerated office work and unremunerated housework. The boundaries between the public and the private space blurred. In a formal office setup, employees spend a majority of their work hours on remunerated work. However, in a work from home scenario, both the private and the public spaces are enmeshed. This entanglement puts a moral obligation on stakeholders to dedicate equal attention to each sphere within the same time frame.

Added to this, the lockdown saw an increase in the burden of domestic work on women without any relaxation in employment hours (Centre for Sustainable Employment 2021: 22). An increase in the number of hours spent on domestic work was directly proportional to the rise in the number of hours spent by the family at home. The percentage of working women spending more than 2 hours a day on cooking and housework went up from 20% to 62% in Karnataka and 12%

to 58% in Rajasthan during the first few lockdowns (India Working Survey 2020 as cited in Centre for Sustainable Employment 2021: 22).

The increased burden of household responsibilities also adversely affected the status of employment of women. In the months following the lockdown, while 61% of men retained their jobs, only 19% of women retained theirs (Centre for Sustainable Employment 2021: 21). Additionally, while only 7% of men lost their jobs, a massive 47% of women suffered permanent job loss (ibid.). Moreover, men who lost out on formal sector jobs found themselves transitioning to informal work or self-employment. In contrast, women who lost their jobs were driven out of the workforce altogether with scanty options to fall back on.

There is a direct correlation between the increased burden of care work and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Dugarova 2020: 7). Before the pandemic, working women compensated for a large amount of care work they were expected to perform through formal care facilities like nannies, babysitters, househelp etc., and informal care provided by the elderly in the family. The lockdown severely restricted access to formal care facilities owing to social distancing protocols and a shift in priorities to the care for those affected by the virus. In addition, given the high susceptibility of the elderly to the virus, they were exempted from the care of primarily children, who could act as potential transmitters. The widespread shutdown of schools exacerbated the homeschooling needs for many children, the burden of which disproportionately fell on women (ibid).

Besides the burden of care work, links can also be established between the socio-economic stresses resulting from the pandemic and a five-fold increase in domestic violence cases worldwide. The prevalence of domestic violence made it even more difficult for many women to work from home (United Nations 2020; UN Women 2021).

In a virtual work from home scenario, any legislative interventions aimed at tackling the connection between domestic violence and decreased efficiency at work need to work along the intersections of The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act 2013 [POSH], The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, and the Information and Technology Act, 2000 [ITA]. Section 2(o) of POSH defines a workplace as an 'extended workplace'. It stretches beyond the commonplace notion of equating work with an office space and, thus, can be applied to a work from home scenario (Gandhi n.d.).

The Ministry of Women and Child Development (n.d.) launched an online portal in 2017 called SHe-Box or the Sexual Harassment Electronic Box. The portal allows for anonymous registration of sexual harassment complaints. The initiative is a positive step in the direction of assuring anonymity in complaints which intra-organisation Internal Complaints' Committees [ICCs] often lack. However, its scope in a work from home scenario needs to be expanded. SHe-Box asks the complainants to define their relationship with the harassers solely in professional terms⁴. This definition omits the situations of harassment during work hours

⁴ Sourced through the complaints' form on Ministry of Women and Child Development (n.d.) website.

resulting from domestic violence or abuse. Therefore, the scope of the scheme needs to be expanded to include this aspect of the 'extended workplace'. In order to tackle the growing unemployment and poverty of women in the wake of the pandemic, the Government of India, in early 2020, announced an emergency cash transfer program under the Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana [PMJDY]. The program aimed to transfer Rs. 500/- to women via PMJDY accounts. However, around 17.6 crore women lack a PMJDY account, with over 32.6 crore living below the poverty line (Pande et al., 2020). Thus, more than half of the intended beneficiaries are currently unable to avail the scheme's benefits. Moreover, not all PMJDY accounts belong to women living below the poverty line. Additionally, a sum of Rs. 500/- a month is hardly sustainable for women looking to escape abusive households and live independently in the middle of the pandemic.

INFORMAL WORK SECTOR: WOMEN, VIRUS, AND WOES

In the first few months of the pandemic, the informal workers globally experienced a 60% loss in their income (Azcona et al., 2020). Women are overrepresented in this sector and make up to 80% of domestic workers. According to UNDP and UN Women estimates, 72% of domestic workers lost their job (Women Deliver and Focus 2030 2021). Following the lockdown and social distancing protocols, a large number of employers unilaterally terminated the contracts of their domestic workers without any provisions for paid leaves. This was primarily a result of the stigma associated with domestic work that projected them as potential carriers of the virus (Sumalatha, Bhat, and Chitra 2021: 447). Unavailability of means of public transport and concern for one's own health also acted as major inhibitions in employment.

Systems of social injustice like caste have also exacerbated the issue of unemployment of sanitation workers, given the increased emphasis on social distancing, cleanliness, and sanitation. Many women sanitation workers come from lower-caste backgrounds. Since the pandemic, they have experienced economic stresses owing to loss of regular income and contractual payments. These stresses are coupled with social exclusion and discrimination (Patil 2021).

Government initiatives have allowed for many domestic and sanitation workers to receive food/ration provisions and Jan-Dhan credits. However, since most workers lack Jan-Dhan accounts, the benefits have not been evenly distributed (Sumalatha, Bhat, and Chitra 2021: 456-57). The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act (2008) mandated the institution of social security and welfare schemes as well as funds for those employed in the unorganised or informal work sector. This Act recognised domestic workers as lawful beneficiaries of the resulting schemes. However, the Code of Social Security, 2020, that was aimed at consolidating the myriad social security schemes under a single law, excludes domestic workers from its ambit. This exclusion puts domestic workers in a vulnerable position (Babu 2020).

Apart from domestic workers, many women have traditionally worked from home as a part of the garment and food production industries. Most of these women are

employed on a contractual basis for activities like stitching, sewing, bindi-sheets making, rolling papads, etc. (Deshpande 2020). The pandemic and the initial months of the lockdown resulted in an economic slump and reduction in demand for these industries. Hence, many of these small-scale workers found it difficult to sustain their income from contractual work (ibid.). Given that women are dominant in this industry, the brunt of the same was borne by them.

The large-scale exodus of migrant workers, predominantly men, has also affected the income and livelihood of women. Especially those who worked on an informal basis in rural areas as well as those who were contributing to the family enterprises in the form of unpaid labour. The sudden unemployment of these migrant workers caused a sharp decline in domestic remittances, which finance over 30% of household consumption (Agarwal 2021: 3). As a result, the burden of compensating for the reduced income mainly fell on women in the form of a decrease in nutrition intake, among other things. According to a CSO survey, 62% of households with returned migrants witnessed a reduction in the number of items eaten per meal (CSO 2020 as cited in Agarwal 2021: 3). Given that in most patriarchal families, women are expected to eat at the very end, this resulted in fewer calorie and protein intake for women and girls.

There exists a high rate of male out-migration from villages since these men supply wage labour for cities. Therefore, many women in rural areas work on farms and are employed under schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme [MGNREGS] for the purpose of earning independent incomes. However, women have been crowded out of the benefits of this scheme due to two reasons. First is the influx of male migrant labourers back to the villages (Agarwal 2021: 3), often actively seeking work. Second is the increase in domestic responsibilities for women due to the aforementioned immigration (ibid.: 3). With the onset of the pandemic, women's share of workdays under MGNREGS has fallen down from 55.0 in 2019-20 to 52.7 in 2020-21 (GoI 2020 as cited in Agarwal 2021: 3).

An increase in domestic responsibilities was a major factor in the decline of remunerated work opportunities for women. According to the aforementioned CSO survey, the dependence on and demand for fuelwood and water went up during the pandemic (ibid.). Another survey of 4,835 rural households across 11 states in June 2020 highlighted that with the return of migrants, women witnessed a 53% increase in the water-fetching time and a 71% increase in the fuelwood collection time (ibid.).

Moreover, similar to the women employed in the formal work sector, women in the informal work sector have been subject to an increased burden of care work and employment inhibitions. So has resulted from an increase in domestic abuse and violence.

WAY FORWARD

The pandemic has undone a considerable amount of progress made in the context of women's liberation. Over 1 crore girls are at the risk of becoming child brides in the upcoming decade (Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2021). Women already spent about 2.5 times as many hours as men on domestic work (ibid.). The pandemic has only added to this burden, putting many women at the risk of getting squeezed out of the labour force.

The primary step in tackling gender inequality, resulting from changes to and in work from home situations, is a more accommodative data analysis. As discussed earlier, both the census data and GDP calculations invisibilise women's work. It is necessary to establish that women's work cannot be neatly classed into remunerative, unremunerative, formal, and informal as easily as that of men. This difficulty arises from the differing occupations women take up as per the space, public or private, they inhabit. Women employed in both the formal and informal sectors perform unpaid labour within the household and often contribute to the household enterprise without seeking remuneration in return. Similarly, women in the formal sector may also be involved in several informal endeavours and vice-versa.

Moreover, the Sustainable Development Goal 5, on achieving gender equality and empowering all women, has highlighted that women's equal participation in decision-making is necessary for a more holistic COVID-19 response and recovery.

The pandemic has also revealed the need for instituting sexual and workplace harassment laws across the intersections of space. With the movement of the workplace inside the home as well as to the virtual screens, workplace harassment laws, and complaint portals should cover the aspects of cybercrime and domestic abuse.

The number of hours women spend on unpaid domestic work cannot be regulated. In light of this, schemes aimed at increasing the number of paid leaves per year for women can be a positive step.

In addition, government financing is essential for many small-scale cooperative enterprises like Shri Mahila Griha Udyog's Lijjat Papad. Cooperatives facilitate the employment of thousands of women engaged in work from home industries. The produce of these industries, in the wake of low demands, can be purchased by the state and incorporated in various relief supplies and ration kits distributed as a part of state-led COVID and disaster relief initiatives.

However, the promotion of small-scale cooperative enterprises alone would not pull women out of pandemic-induced poverty. Overemphasis on the promotion of small-scale industries for the purpose of 'women empowerment' overlooks the fact that women are excluded from the more remunerative labour force involved in large-scale industries. This exclusion happens due to sexist prejudices regarding their physical capability. Most women find themselves confined to cloth-making and food-producing industries, with limited scope for growth. They are routinely pushed out of the industrial workforce that favours men, does not

create safe working conditions for women, and often assigns them jobs with lower pay.

Therefore, state-led interventions are essential in promoting women's employment in more stable, remunerative, and secure large-scale industrial sectors. The State needs to step in and ensure that women working in large-scale factories and industries are being recruited for the same jobs as men, paid equally, and given the access to an ideal working environment. Affirmative action policies can be a positive step in this direction.

Lastly, a national policy for domestic workers is necessary to ensure the securities and welfare they seek in this hour. Job security under such a policy should not only focus on ensuring steady employment but also on improving the conditions under which the workers are working. The ambit of this policy should cover issues related to the POSH as well as the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.

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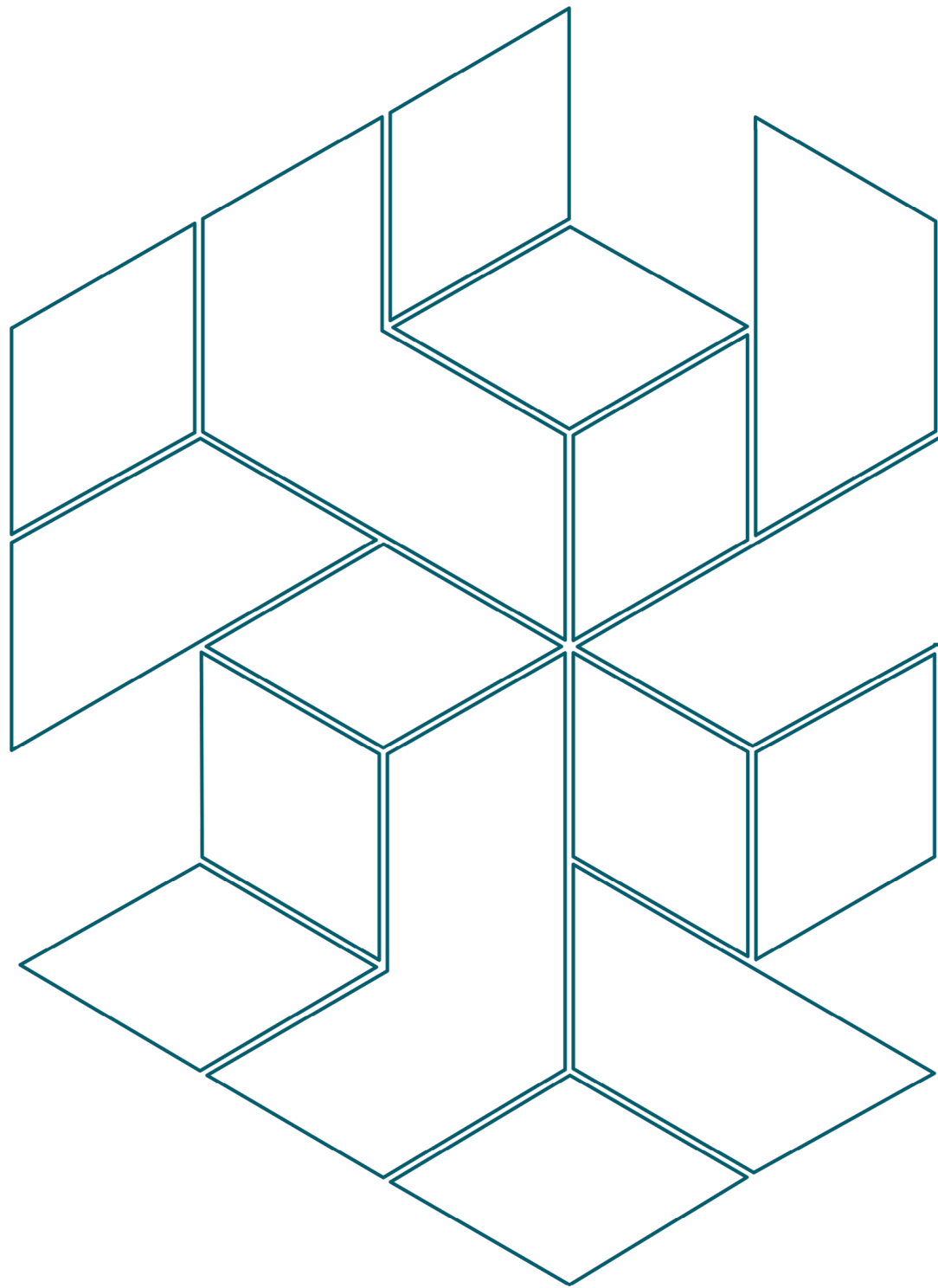
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