

# Women Find Themselves At The Wrong End Of India's K-Shaped Recovery

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Economists have settled on the letter 'K' as the best representation of the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis — some segments of the economy have rebounded strongly, while others have faltered.

That divergence, most often referred to in the context of income segments, has also extended to gender.

While employment among men is moving back to pre-Covid levels rapidly, for women it has been a slow climb. The reasons, researchers and economists say, cover a wide spectrum. From marital status and education to caste and religion, are all factors that could be behind the slow recovery of employment among women as the Covid crisis eases.

As of December 2020, the worker participation rate for women was at 85% of its pre-pandemic level in urban areas and at 78% in rural areas, according to the analysis of the Centre For Monitoring Indian Economy or CMIE's Consumer Pyramids Household Survey analysed by researchers at the Azim Premji University. For men, the worker participation rate is now nearly back at pre-pandemic levels.

Research work underway at the university, being led by Rosa Abraham, Amit Basole and Surbhi Kesar, titled '*Down and Out? The Gendered Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on India's Labour Market*' digs further into this trend. Early findings suggest that despite historically low work participation rates for women, a significant proportion of women experienced job loss of a more permanent nature because of the pandemic, while men experienced an almost-complete recovery into employment.

The work participation rate is defined as the percentage of total workers to the total working-age population.

Conditional on losing work, women were eleven times more likely to not return to work subsequently, the research by Abraham, Basole and Kesar is suggesting.

To be sure, the research takes into account data available until September 2020, leaving room for the possibility that a pick-up in the pace of recovery since October could have improved the employment scenario for women.



Labourers work on a dried lake to try and revive it under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) on the outskirts of Hyderabad. Representational image.

### **What Does Recovery Depend On? Just About Everything.**

The analysis beyond the numbers suggests that marital status, education, caste, and religion were strongly related to the likelihood of recovery in women employment.

Abraham explained that the recovery analysis found contrasting effects between men and women, with married women less likely to return to work and married men more likely to return to work. Religion and gender intersected to result in a disproportionate impact for Muslim women, who were more unlikely to return to work, unlike in case of Muslim men where religion had no significant impact, Abraham said.

Even when controlled for demographic and employment categories, such as age, education, caste, marital status, type of employment, and industry of work, the analysis by Abraham, Basole and Kesar showed that women were still less likely to return to work compared to men in the post-Covid era.

Moreover, a large share of men in the workforce moved to self-employment or daily wage work, in agriculture, trade or construction. For women, mobility and movement into alternate employment arrangements were limited, instead they were observed to move out of the workforce altogether. This suggests that typical fallback options for employment do not exist for women, Abraham said.

While the analysis based on the CMIE's Consumer Pyramid Household Survey is the most extensive, other smaller surveys have thrown up similar findings. Not surprisingly, the increase in housework emerged as another key factor behind women not returning to work even as the economy opened up.

A telephonic survey conducted by the New Delhi-based Institute of Social Studies Trust covered a small sample of 316 women working in the informal sector during the October-November 2020 period. That survey showed that about 60% of those surveyed reported an increase in domestic work inside the home, while 9% of women reported an increase in outside household domestic work like fetching water. About 66% of women respondents said that since the schools and *anganwadi* centres were closed, they have to spend more time with children.

Four out of every 10 women said they got no help in sharing household work, while another four said they received help from other women members of the house, Shiney Chakraborty, a research analyst at the institute. Among those who did return to work, more found employment in the informal sector and in the gig economy, with no social security or maternity leave, Chakraborty added.

## **The Absence Of The ‘Care Economy’**

In many ways, the Covid crisis worsened existing factors that has kept India’s female labour force participation rate low at about 23.6%. The labour force participation rate is calculated as the labour force divided by the total working-age population.

In the absence of a care economy infrastructure, it is tough for the female labour force participation rate to increase, said Lekha Chakraborty, professor at NIPFP.

**The need for the ‘care economy policies’ is even greater now as the pandemic has pushed more women into ‘time poverty’ because of a jump in domestic responsibilities, Chakraborty said. “Care centres are now as critical as quarantine centres.”**

The government has earmarked 40% of the funds under its flagship rural jobs guarantee scheme for women. But just being the employer of last resort is not enough, said Chakraborty, adding that job guarantee policies alone will not push up the participation of women in the labour force. The government needs to take more proactive measures to boost it, she said.

Even pre-pandemic, the ‘Feminisation U’ hypothesis, which states that female labour force participation first declines and then rises with the development process, did not hold in India, said Shinee Chakraborty. In fact, in India, the female labour force participation rate has seen a drop even in years of high economic growth. This was despite a rise in female literacy and a decline in fertility rate.

Now, even amid signs of an economic recovery, there is little reason to believe that the link will hold and women employment will recover in step with the broader economy, she said.

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