

# India: Covid-19 has driven up rural women's workforce participation, but in precarious jobs

Thursday 13 October 2022, by [MISHRA Jigyasa](#) (Date first published: 8 October 2022).

**The loss in income due to the pandemic trapped more women in the web of debt and bonded labour than before.**

Kiran Devi, who lives on the outskirts of Dehradun, started working as a domestic help in October 2020. "I had to begin working since my husband wasn't getting work and we had no savings left," the 29-year-old mother of two told *IndiaSpend*. The money the family had saved was spent on food rations and on cellphone internet recharges for the children's online classes as in-person school was shut because of the Covid-19 pandemic. "I asked my husband if I could work and he allowed me to. I earn Rs 2,500 from each of the two houses I work at."

Kiran's husband, 36-year-old Khushiram, a daily wage labourer, found work in February 2021, "Before that we survived only on my income," said Kiran.

In September 2020, Kiran said she was getting a better job, cleaning the premises of a non-profit that paid Rs 7,500. "I wanted that one but my husband said this is better because I could go in the morning and evening, two hours each. I would have the rest of the time for cooking and cleaning my home."

The latest labour force data for India from 2020-21 show that labour force participation by women (usual status, +15 years) at 32.5%, is at its [highest](#) level in four years, driven largely by more women in rural areas joining the workforce, we had reported in July 2022, in the [first part](#) of *IndiaSpend's Women at Work 3.0* series.

The [loss in household income](#) because of reduced pay or job losses for the main earner, often a man, meant that women who previously did not work outside the house, got an opportunity to do so. But as our reporting shows, and experts confirm, a large part of this increase has come from poor quality, low paying jobs, like the one that Kiran Devi took up.

Just like her, many women are restricted in the kinds of jobs they can take up: Workplaces need to be near home and the workday should leave enough time for house work and care for the elderly and children, the [responsibility](#) of which [disproportionately falls on women](#).

In this third part of the Women at Work 3.0 series, we explore the kinds of jobs that women in rural India took up, and the conditions that they worked under, to be able to support their families in times of distress.

## Burden of care work

Research [published](#) by the Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy

(IWWAGE) found that in couples, the norm that the wife is responsible for most housework with the husband almost totally absent is a significant reason that women stay out of the labour force, even when they are educated.

On average, women in rural India spent upto [301 minutes per day](#) on domestic work, more than thrice the time spent by men (98 minutes), according to data from the [Time Use survey](#) in 2019. The 68<sup>th</sup> round of the National Sample Survey Organisation [survey](#) in 2011-'12 had found that up to 60% of women in rural India said they have no choice in taking up care work, since there is "no other member to carry out the domestic duties".

Having to earn while their husbands couldn't was an added responsibility for women during the Covid-19 pandemic. A resident of Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh, 33-year-old Geeta Kushwaha said she began working at a construction site once the restrictions on moving outside the home in the first lockdown were reduced. "We had borrowed some Rs 10,000 from our relatives and I had sold a pair of my earrings to manage our livelihood during the lockdown," said Kushwaha, mother of two.

Her husband, whose oil and herbs shop was still closed at that time, suggested she work in construction. "I agreed because we needed money. I used to get up at four in the morning, do all the [house] chores and then go to the site at nine. In the evening, I would return by 5.30 pm and get back to the chores," she said. "My children aren't old enough to help me and my husband has never done it in his life."

Covid-19 might have changed this disparity a little, research found. By April 2020, there had been widespread job losses across the country because of Covid-19 and related lockdowns. Men did spend more time on housework in April 2020, but by August (when jobs for men had mostly recovered), time spent on home and care work reduced, but was still above pre-pandemic levels, found economist Ashwini Deshpande in her [research](#) using data from the Centre For Monitoring Indian Economy.

### **Low-paying jobs**

"I wanted to work in a field or on a construction site, but nobody was giving work because of the lockdown and later, even when the lockdown was removed, they preferred giving work to the men," said 37-year-old Gurjeet from Mansa district in Punjab. "It wasn't the time to wait for a suitable job while we were on the verge of starvation, so I started working in two homes to collect cow dung," from homes.

For many women in this region, choosing whichever job was most readily available was an easy way to get immediate financial help in the form of loans. Gurjeet took two loans from one of the families she worked for. "It was a loan of Rs 8,000," which would amount to Rs 12,230 by 2023, Gurjeet said. Then when her husband fell ill during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in April 2021, she took two more loans of Rs 500 each. If she is unable to pay in time, she will have to pay 2% more each month until the loan is paid back.

Of the Rs 500 she gets as a monthly salary from the employer who gave her the loan, Rs 250 is deducted per month as loan repayment.

The economic shock from the pandemic pushed Gurjeet into what is known as [bonded or forced labour](#), in which a person has to work under a threat - in this case non-payment of an unfair debt - [with little or no pay](#).

India prohibits [bonded labour](#) through Articles [21](#), which says a person cannot be deprived of their

personal liberty, and Article [23](#) of the Constitution, which prohibits human trafficking and forced labour. The government has also passed a specific [law](#), The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, to prohibit the practice.

“I know some women work for [MGNREGA](#) [the national jobs programme under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act] and earn around Rs 200 per day and here I am, covered in dung and getting almost nothing,” said Gurjeet. “I want to get rid of this and work under MGNREGA but I am compelled to work here since I am under their debt.”

As many as 93.7% of households in which the women work as farm labourers were under debt and the average debt amount per indebted household was Rs 57,537, found a study led by Gian Singh, a researcher and retired professor of economics at Punjab University in Patiala, [based on a field survey](#) in 2016-’17.

The lockdown worsened the situation. “After the lockdown was imposed, all of us were compelled to go under some or the other form of debt. Those who were already in debt took a new one,” Harpreet, one of Gurjeet’s neighbours, said.

To take care of the family, including three school-going children, she borrowed Rs 15,000 from one of her employers, at whose house she collects dung, in August 2020. She had started working because her husband lost his job at a garment factory due to the Covid-19 lockdown. Two years down, she still owes them Rs 5,000, even though she has worked nearly each day, she said.

“When the companies, small scale industries started to lay off workers, the pressure [to run the house] fell on the women who had been staying home for domestic work,” said Gian Singh. “Be that working from home or moving to nearby houses for work, this was a common pattern in all the rural areas, regardless of the state or district.”

In the case of dung scavenging, he explained, the loss in income due to the pandemic meant more women were caught in the web of debt and bonded labour than before.

The situation is particularly precarious for those from the scheduled castes. For instance, the five women IndiaSpend met who worked as dung scavengers in Mansa were Dalits, working at the houses of upper caste landowners.

Gurjeet said, “While my husband was Covid-19 positive, I could not go to clean waste for one morning and in the evening, malik [boss] came and abused us. He said I am born to do just one thing-cleaning; and I was escaping from that. I had to go clean his house that evening.”

### **Future female workforce**

Our reporting showed that the decisions women took, especially related to bonded labour, will have impacts on the future generation of women.

When 20-year-old Jhumer’s mother fell ill during the pandemic, her family took loans from two homes where her mother worked, Jhumer said. She lives in Mansa with her father and two younger brothers who are in school. The loans didn’t help save her mother’s life. “I could not do anything to save her. Maybe if we could go to the hospital, she would have survived,” she said. After her mother’s death, Jhumer was forced to continue her mother’s work as a goha-kura wali (local term for those who collect dung), as the family had to repay the loans, she said.

The impact of this increase in women’s labour force participation is mixed – more girls might be inspired to work in the future, when they see their mothers’ working. Ayesha Begum’s nine-year-old

daughter Shabnam accompanies her when Ayesha goes to a neighbour's house to weave shawls, in the Ganderbal district of Kashmir, a job that brings her Rs 2,500 a month. The cloth shop her husband used to work at closed down after the first national lockdown in March 2020, and Ayesha, 36, started working at a neighbour's handloom to make ends meet.

"One day my daughter wanted to eat chicken, and I explained to her that it was not possible to eat meat everyday because of the lack of money," said Ayesha. "That's when she said she'll also weave shawls so we can earn more and eat chicken everyday."

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**Jigyasa Mishra**

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