



This Study Has Been Carried Out by **WAYVE Foundation** in Collaboration with **Zubaan** for the project

No Space for Work: Political economy and challenges to women's labour participation, safety and autonomy (or NSFW)

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Introduction

Recent studies indicate a decrease in rates of women's participation in the formal and informal sectors of the Indian economy. The low rates have largely been interpreted as a result of cultural attitudes and social norms that discriminate against women in the workplace. However, less is documented regarding how structural violence, workplace violence, and work-related hostility affects individual choice. Women's rights groups have been drawing attention to the links between violence and women's exclusion from labour markets, underlining the need to frame such violence as permeating state and civil infrastructure to better understand the devaluing of women and their precarious position in the workplace.¹

Even before the pandemic, gender equality was atypical of a workplace in India. Now women are on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis, as they make up the bulk of essential workers, including 70% of health-care workers. Yet, worldwide and across all regions and income groups, the pandemic has hit women's labour market opportunities the hardest.² This is likely to reverse some of the progress made under Sustainable Development Goal 8, which aims to "promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

91% of Indian women in paid jobs are in the informal sector, according to the Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy-Institute of Social Studies Trust report.³ They say that many of the sectoral impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will disproportionately affect women. These impacts will be further aggravated by the following factors:

- underlying practices of discrimination, violence and harassment;
- underrepresentation of women's voice, representation and leadership;
- wage gaps; and
- unevenly shared unpaid care and family obligations.

Despite their numbers, women working in the informal sector have to also deal with the double whammy of insecurity as well as gender bias – their incomes tend to be low and fluctuating, they do not have the bargaining power to seek better terms or working conditions, and they have low social status, says Strengthening Socio-Economic Rights of Women in the Informal Economy, an October 2020 report published jointly by IWWAGE and the Self-Employed Women's Association.⁴

This study aims to explore how the experiences of work for women, and forms of discrimination/violence they face at work as well as their homes have changed in the times of the pandemic. It also aims to interlink various factors in women's lives that play the world of paid economic work against the backdrop of unpaid and devalued work, and how their social identities (based on caste, class, region, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) influence these relationships.

The study attempts to contribute to the ongoing conversation around the impact of COVID-19 on the female workforce by delving into specific areas of work such as domestic work, sanitation, construction work, healthcare and care work. The study aims to work in a collaborative manner with grassroots women activists by directly involving women workers in the process and making them the

¹ <https://www.idrc.ca/en/project/no-space-work-action-research-project-women-work-and-violence>

² <https://ilostat.ilo.org/how-women-are-being-left-behind-in-the-quest-for-decent-work-for-all/>

³ <https://scroll.in/article/990984/in-indias-informal-economy-crores-of-women-face-gender-bias-and-insecurity>

⁴ https://www.indiaspend.com/uploads/2021/03/26/file_upload-446786.pdf

chroniclers of their own experiences. The study adopts an approach where women workers in the unorganised sector are interviewed so as to create a space where they could articulate their issues in their own way. The study aims to produce outputs, in the form of a report, which could be used to disseminate information by generating evidence on the links between discrimination/violence and workplace exclusion.

This is participatory research involving 15 women activists (researchers) grounding their work in their own communities in Uttar Pradesh. The study covers seven districts of Uttar Pradesh, namely Kanpur Dehat, Kushinagar, Muzaffarnagar, Ghazipur, Fatehpur, Bijnor and Gorakhpur. 74 women workers from Dalit and Muslim communities across these districts were interviewed from December 2020 to April 2021. The specific work areas in the informal sector that were chosen for the study inter-alia are-sanitation work, construction work, healthcare, domestic work, cattle rearing, individual vendors and a few workers in the garment industry. The workers include women affected by the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots and women from the Musahar community.⁵

Much has already been discussed about the low and declining female labour force participation.⁶ However, there is still a greater need to delve deeper into factors that influence declining female labour force participation in India, especially from an intersectional angle.

Review of Literature

As a backdrop to the study, published literature on both, national and international aspects of tribunals are reviewed and presented in comprehensive capsule. The literature reviewed is as under:

- **Articles**

1. ***How Women Are Being Left Behind in The Quest For Decent Work For All: International Labour Organisation***

Lockdown measures threaten the livelihoods of informal economy workers, with women overrepresented in high-risk sectors

An estimated 1.6 billion informal economy workers – that is, 76 per cent of informal workers globally – were significantly impacted by the lockdown measures and/or working in the hardest-hit sectors such as accommodation and food services. Among them, women were overrepresented in high-risk sectors: 42 per cent of women workers were working in those sectors, compared to 32 per cent of men.

Steeper employment losses for women than men, with many dropping out of the labour force entirely

The labour market disruption in 2020 far exceeded the impact of the global financial crisis of 2009. Employment losses were not only unprecedented but also steeper for women (5.0 per cent) than for men (3.9 per cent). Moreover, as school closures due to lockdowns required more at-home supervision of children, women were much more likely to drop out of the

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musahar>

⁶ 7 This is a heavily researched subject, as a number of empirical papers have analysed the reasons for low and declining labour force participation of women in India.

labour force than men in order to provide such care. This is further increasing the longstanding gender gaps in labour force participation rates.⁷

2. In India's Informal Economy, Crores of Women Face Gender Bias and Insecurity: Scroll

Women make for only 23% of those employed in India's informal sector, but up to 91% of Indian women in paid jobs are in the informal sector, according to the Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy-Institute of Social Studies Trust report. Despite their numbers, women working in the informal sector have to also deal with the double whammy of insecurity as well as gender bias – their incomes tend to be low and fluctuating, they do not have the bargaining power to seek better terms or working conditions, and they have low social status, says Strengthening Socio-Economic Rights of Women in the Informal Economy, an October 2020 report published jointly by IWWAGE and the Self-Employed Women's Association.

• Reports

1. Strengthening Socio-Economic Rights of Women in the Informal Economy: The SEWA Approach in West Bengal and Jharkhand.

This study assesses SEWA's programme against these objectives in order to understand the impact that various components of the programme have had on informal women workers across various trades in West Bengal and Jharkhand. The study also provides lessons and recommendations for scaling up the programme, particularly in a postCOVID-19 context.

In terms of COVID-19 and lockdown related impacts, close to a majority of respondents reported a loss in income, particularly those engaged in agriculture and construction work. In terms of assistance required in the next six months, a majority of women indicated that they will require help to find a new job, and several also indicated the need for assistance to avail of government benefits.

Employment in the informal sector and informal employment are two different concepts: the first is defined in terms of the characteristics of the place of work, while the latter is related to the employment relationship and social protection associated with the job, as per the IWWAGE-ISST report.⁸

2. The Supply Chain Ripple Effect: How Covid-19 is Affecting Garment Workers and Factories in Asia and the Pacific: ILO

The COVID-19 crisis is hitting the garment sector in Asia and the Pacific particularly hard, affecting millions of workers and enterprises in the supply chains and with observed "ripple effects" across a number of dimensions.

As of September 2020, about one in two garment workers in the region lived in countries with required closures of all but essential workplaces, including garment factories. Nearly half of all garment supply chain jobs in the region were dependent on domestic or foreign consumer demand from countries with highly stringent lockdown measures, where sharp declines in retail sales were also observed.

Women make up the majority of the region's garment workers and are disproportionately affected by the crisis – further exacerbating existing inequalities on workload, occupational segregation, distribution of unpaid care work and earnings.⁹

⁷ <https://ilostat.ilo.org/how-women-are-being-left-behind-in-the-quest-for-decent-work-for-all/>

⁸ https://www.indiaspend.com/uploads/2021/03/26/file_upload-446786.pdf

⁹ https://www.indiaspend.com/uploads/2021/03/26/file_upload-446785.pdf

3. Closing Gender Data Gaps in the World of Work Role of the 19th ICLS

Standards: ILO

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the existence of many inequalities in the world of work, including disparities in women and men's engagement in paid and unpaid work.

These inequalities are being to be exacerbated by the crisis, but the data required to understand and monitor these trends are scarcely available for varying reasons.

One of the benefits of the research undertaken, including extensive pilot studies, is that it allows the analytical potential of the standards to be illustrated, highlighting messages such as:

- *Both women and men who responded to the studies widely engaged in unpaid work,*
- *whether or not they were employed. However, women were more likely to engage in these activities and spent substantially more time doing unpaid work than men on average.*
- *Men were more likely to be engaged in employment than women and employed males did have longer working time in employment than employed females. Consequently, males contributed over 60% of all the measured working time in employment.*
- *This gap is reversed and even greater when unpaid household services are considered.*
- *Participation and working time in this work was substantially higher among women than men. As a result, women contributed three quarters of all of this type of work.¹⁰*

- **Websites**

1. <https://zubaanprojects.org/nospaceforwork/>

To know more about the project-No Space For Work: Political economy and challenges to women's labour participation, safety and autonomy (or NSFW) is a national project spearheaded by Zubaan and funded by the Ford Foundation. It seeks to understand how women navigate the world of paid economic work against the backdrop of unpaid and devalued work, and how their social identities (based on caste, class, region, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) influence these relationships.

Responding to recent events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, the project has adapted the focus towards exploring how the experiences of work for women, and forms of violence they face at work have changed in the times of the pandemic.¹¹

Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives



- Assessing how violence/discrimination within and outside home affect the female workforce participation in the unorganised sector.

¹⁰ https://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/publication/wcms_757964.pdf

¹¹ <https://zubaanprojects.org/projects/no-space-for-work/>



Finding out how the pandemic has affected their personal lives and work.



Know more about their working conditions.

Research questions

This study would attempt to answer the following questions:

- How much women work as against their male counterparts?
- Do women face discrimination/harassment at work because of their caste/gender identity?
- Are they abused at home?
- What is their economic status?
- What are their work conditions?
- What impact did COVID-19 make on their lives and work?

Scope of Study

This is participatory research involving 15 women activists grounding their work in their own communities in Uttar Pradesh. The study covers seven districts of Uttar Pradesh, namely Kanpur Dehat, Kushinagar, Muzaffarnagar, Ghazipur, Fatehpur, Bijnor and Gorakhpur. 74 women workers from Dalit and Muslim communities across these districts were interviewed from December 2020 to April 2021. The specific work areas in the informal sector that were chosen for the study inter-alia are-sanitation work, construction work, healthcare, domestic work, cattle rearing, individual vendors and a few workers in the garment industry. The workers include women affected by the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots and women from the Musahar community.

Research Methodology

This study is an empirical study where the conclusions are drawn strictly from concrete empirical evidence. The researcher has used interviews as their tool for primary data collection. An interview is a method of data collection that involves two groups of people, where the first group is the interviewer (the activists/researchers from their own community who asked them questions) and the other is interviewee (the workers). The interviews were in-person verbal interviews where the researchers asked questions from the workers face-to-face. The interviews were semi-structured interviews for which each researcher was provided an interview guide (attached as **Annexure 1**). The interview guide was tailored specifically to meet the requirement of the research. They recorded the responses on a notepad and typed the interviews (**Annexure 2**). The interviews were in their local language which were later converted to individual case studies in English (**Annexure 3**). Finally, the case studies were used to fill out data to the spreadsheets to draw out specific conclusions (**Annexure 4**).

Chapterization

For the sake of structure and clarity, this brief is divided into different chapters. These chapters attempt to address the research questions in a systematic manner.

I. Overview

Out of the 74 women who were interviewed, 50 were Dalit (67%), 20 Muslim (27%) and 4 Musahar (0.05%). Only 20 women out of 74 could read or write (27%). They were in the age group of 25-60 years. On an average, they had 3-4 children and they worked for 16 hours a day in toto. Most of them slept for 5-6 hours per night.

32% of the women said they had faced some sort of abuse within their families. (physical, verbal, financial)

Rekha is a 40-year-old Dalit woman who works at a brick kiln and is a mother to six daughters. Four of her daughters go to school and two have passed out of school and now help her with household work. Rekha has faced gender and caste discrimination all her life. She believes that being a woman in our society is a curse.

“We have been facing discrimination since childhood for being a woman. My parents always kept me engaged in household work and never let me go out or study. I have faced a lot of discrimination for being a girl. However, I don’t do it with my girls. I always try to protect them from what all I have gone through.”

Rekha has faced a lot of domestic violence after her marriage. She was abused for giving birth to six daughters. Her husband is an alcoholic and he beats her a lot. He once threatened to kill her along with all her six daughters. Her in-laws used to torture her a lot and her mother-in-law wanted to marry her son to someone else who could give her a grandson. While talking about her life during the COVID-19 lockdown, she said:

“For the first month things weren’t that bad because we had some money. We survived on it for one month. But then the situation kept getting worse. We could not afford vegetables and we were out of ration. We received some grains on our ration card. We sold the rice to a shopkeeper and bought spices in lieu of it. We ate salt and Roti with chutney for the whole of lockdown. We didn’t see milk for almost four months. Whenever my youngest daughter asked for tea, I mixed some jaggery in water and gave her.”

Shabana is a 26-year-old Muslim woman from Ilaichipur, Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh. She has been divorced and now lives with her parents and a school going son. Shabana works as a sweeper at a hospital. She told about herself,

“My husband left me and we are now divorced. He used to beat me every day along with his brother. He told me that I will have to do whatever his brother wants. His brother wanted to do wrong things with me. My husband used to drag me to his brother’s room and lock the door from outside. They both used to beat me a lot if I refused. I never understood why he married me if he wanted me to sleep with his brother. How is that justified? When I told my family members about this, my brother and his wife blamed me for my parent’s deteriorating health and told me that it was me because of whom my parents are having breathing problems. I am giving them stress by not living peacefully with my husband. I had to go back to my husband and bear it all for so many days. Finally, when I divorced my husband, I was 2.5 months pregnant. Now my son is 8-year-old. He is my life.”

Babita, a 27-year-old Dalit girl married the man of her choice. However, her husband abused her after their marriage.

“My in laws never really accepted me and always harassed me. Eventually, my husband also started to harass me just like his family members. He also forcefully took away the 50000 Rupees that I had in my account.

All of the women who were interviewed did household work along with their jobs. In all the cases, they either did it alone or were helped by other female members in the family. In toto, they worked twice as much as their male counterparts. It was even observed that at some places, they do the same amount of work on their jobs as their male counterparts, but still they are paid less for the same amount of work. For example, at the brick kiln, the male labourers are paid INR 300 per day while the women are paid INR 150-200 for the same work.

89% of the women who were interviewed had lost their jobs during the first lockdown. All of them struggled a lot during the lockdown. Financially, mentally and physically.

Javeda, who worked as a tailor prior to the lockdown, stopped getting orders and lost her job when the lockdown happened.

“We literally starved during the lockdown. Me, my husband, my mother-in-law and brother-in-law all went hungry for 2-2 days just so that our children could eat whatever food we were left with. Don’t ask me about those days. We have spent the whole lockdown crying and worrying about our future.”

Rita, who is a daily wage labourer, shared what her family went through during the lockdown.

“During the Covid-19 lockdown, I faced difficulty, as the rations started drying up and no source of income was available. One of my sons broke his arm, my mother-in-law was sick, and my husband did not get his salary. We were in a serious financial crunch. Our family slept hungry on some days.”

The lockdown has had a major impact on their lives. For some, it has caused irrecoverable loss in terms of their livelihood.

II. Work Conditions

On an average, the women who were interviewed gave 8-12 hours per day to their jobs. Their monthly income ranged from INR 3000-5000. 21% of them were the sole breadwinners in their families. One thing that was found to be common amongst the women working as labourers at brick kilns was the long hours of work. They worked for 18-20 hours per day at the brick kiln.

39% of the women were daily wage earners. (29 out of 74). 17 of the daily wage earners had a second job for when they are out of work. The daily workers earned Rs. 150-200 per day on an average. The no. of days they work in a month was not fixed. On an average, these women walked a distance of 3-5 km for work every day.

The work conditions for women working in different sectors were different. What was common among all of them was the fact that they were not satisfied or happy with their work.

Naseema is a 40-year-old woman who makes beedi (a type of Indian cigarette). She says that the biggest problem she faces while doing her work is the prolonged sitting. She has to sit at the same place for 7-8 hours straight and that causes her back to hurt and she gets gas problems. She loses her appetite because of it. Apart from that, all the work with tobacco causes her eyes to burn and causes cough.

"I don't think I have ever faced discrimination for being from my community because all the labourers and the Thekedaar (employer) are from the same community. However, if there are male labourers present with us, our employer always prefers them to do his work first. So, that makes me feel a little disadvantaged because I am a woman." Said Naseema.

For a whopping majority of women who were interviewed, rainy season brought a lot of problems.

Balli, a 50-year-old woman who belongs to the dhobi community of Muslims, works as a washerwoman. A lot of woman who do the same job become completely jobless during the rainy season as the clothes don't dry out easily. Balli carries a bundle of clothes on her head and goes to the pond to wash them each day as she doesn't have a bathroom in her house. During the rainy season, she can neither go out for work nor do her clothes dry out.

Women working at the brick kilns work for unnatural long stretches. On an average, they work for 18-20 hours at the brick klin. One of them shared the impact that the long hours of work have been putting on her body.

"The biggest problem I face with my work is that I don't get to rest even a little bit. I get just 10-15 mins to eat my lunch, and then I have to get back to work. it causes digestion problems and I get swelling all around my belly area. I feel nauseated and uneasy while working."

While for some, the problematic area might be long working hours, for others, it is less pay for their work.

Shabnam, who makes laces for a living, thinks that she is underpaid for her skill and hard work.

"I don't get paid enough for the amount of effort I put in the work. The work requires skill and is quite intricate. It is the reason why my eyesight has become so weak. I get rashes on my inner thighs because I have to keep sitting on the ground all the time while working. It becomes worse during my periods.

Rakhi and her sister work at a factory where they pack peas into small packets. They raise a lot of brows on people from their community.

"People in our community don't like the fact that me and my sister go out to work. They often doubt us and say that we are going to ruin our family's reputation. They believe that women should only stay indoors. They question my character because I have a mobile phone. They are suspicious that I go out and spend my time with boys. I believe that they don't want women to earn money. If we start earning then how will they get to control us?"

For Muslim women, work comes with their own set of problems. They are often stigmatised and discriminated against for belonging to a particular religion. Some of them shared how.

Saajida, a tailor from Muzaffarnagar said-

"The people from other communities have something against us Muslims. They look at us like we have spread the coronavirus. They call us names like 'Jamaatis' and 'Mullas' and discriminate against us."

"I face discrimination within the community as I cannot take veil at my workplace. The relatives condemn me for working at the brick kiln. I also face domestic violence as I remain unwell and perform tasks slowly. Thus, my husband gets angry and beats me. I face discrimination blatantly at my workplace. My employer shames me for being a Muslim. Due to our caste also, we keep on

facing verbal abuse and it has become a part of our everyday life”, said 29-year-old Ruby who works at a brick kiln.

Caste Atrocities

67% of the women who were interviewed were Dalit (50 out of 74). A lot of them confessed that they have been a victim of caste discrimination outside their homes. 58% of the women who were interviewed said that they have faced some sort of harassment/discrimination at work. In all the cases, it related to their caste/gender/religion. The use of casteist slurs by big landlords and employers was found to be common in a lot of narratives.

Laila Devi, who has been a manual scavenger for most of her life, now cleans toilets for a living. Apart from that, she makes cow dung cakes for the landlords in her area and in return, she gets to keep some of those cow dung cakes. She uses them to cook her food. She says that her work is so filthy that she has lost her appetite. Even after returning home from work, she doesn't feel like eating or drinking anything. She can't get the faecal smell out of her head. When asked if she has ever been called by her caste name, she said-

“People call us ‘Halalkhors’ and hesitate in coming into contact with us. They treat us as untouchables as our community has been engaged with the dirty work.”

Chanda Devi is a sweeper at a local school. At the school, she looks after the little kids and makes sure they are sitting at the right place. At 2 PM when the children go back home, she cleans the toilets and sweeps the floors in classes and cleans the corridors, all for just INR 3700 a month. On being asked if she has ever been harassed at work, she said-

“I have never been harassed at work but there are two teachers at the school who look down upon me because of my caste. They treat me as an untouchable and don't drink the water that I offer to teachers in the staff room. They don't say anything to us as such but their behaviour clearly tells us what's on their mind.”

Rekha is a Dalit woman who works at a brick kiln, while speaking about her employer, she told the interviewer-

“Our employer belongs to an upper caste and he along with other people from the upper castes use casteist slurs against us and call us names. Every 15 days, he makes payment to us. He often miscalculates the wages and shouts at us. Nobody speaks against him because they don't want to lose their jobs.”

Bala is a 55-year-old Dalit woman who along with her family is engaged in taming pigs which are either sold as meat or are bought by others. Along with taming pigs she has to work at houses of landlords in sanitary work where she has to pick and clean dung of livestock of landlords. She told that verbal abuse and casteist slurs are common at work place, she is often looked down and mocked for being from particular caste. She has to continue working in such situations because she thinks she doesn't have many options. Women of her community often face eve teasing and molestation from rich and higher caste people of village. Also, it's common for landlords to delay payment to women like her.

Shivani, who belongs to the Chamaar community of Dalits and works at a brick kiln shared how she is treated at work by her employer-

“We face a lot of harassment at work by our employer. He doesn't pay us enough for our work. Suppose if I make 1000 bricks in a day, he would pay me just for 850 bricks saying that 150 of them

aren't up to the mark. We are ridiculed for our caste as well. He tells us that we Chamaars are meant to be labourers. We have no life but to work all day and then eat meat and alcohol for dinner. That is why, nobody wants to associate with us. (Tum Chamaaro ka kaam hi hai din bhar mazdoori karna, ganda rehna aur phir raat ko meat khana aur daaru peena. Tabhi toh tumhein koi nahin puchta!)”.

Another woman Sudeshna, who also works at a brick kiln shared what her employer puts her through-

“Our employer treats us as if we have no life. He shouts at us and belittles us. If he doesn't like the bricks that we make, he doesn't pay us at all. We are always underpaid for the amount of hard labour and effort we put into the work. He uses casteist slurs against us and tells us that we don't deserve money. All we do is drink alcohol and do filthy jobs. We don't deserve to have money. We are always under suspicion that he will deduct our wages and not pay us enough. Nobody can take a stand against him because we are too poor to have enmity against him.”

Workplace Harassment

Jaggo works at a vegetable market where she has to go at 7 AM in the morning and she comes back home at 7 PM. She works 12 hours every day at the mandi. She sorts vegetables from bad ones. During the lockdown, she was fired. When she went to another mandi to look for work, she was turned down.

“I was told that I couldn't do it. I said I would do the job just like other women were doing. They said- all the women who work here have to make physical relationship with the employer. If you can do it then you can work here. When they said this, I came back from that place to place where I used to work earlier. I faced many difficulties getting the job again.”

Sabra, who makes decorative laces for a living. She has to go out to the market every once in a while to buy raw material for her tailoring work. She once faced an incident of eve teasing while travelling in a bus, when she was on her way home from the market. Two men were following her when she climbed on the bus, one of them sat on the seat beside her and was repeatedly placing his hand on her thigh, after she noticed this Sabra built the courage to stop the bus immediately, she then slapped the man on his face and raised her voice against what he was doing.

Bilkis also works as a tailor, whenever she gets out of the house to buy stuff, she is looked at with suspicion.

“Whenever I step out of the house, people look at me with suspicion. They look down upon me because my husband is no more. I feel like I raise a lot of brows when I go out without a husband. People often doubt my chastity and ask me where all the money is coming from. I fear that they will label me as an unchaste woman. It is really hard being a widowed woman in our society. People question every action of mine. All of the widowed women have to face this sort of character assassination. I live in a constant fear. I fear for my safety.”

Just like Sabra and Bilkis, Shabana too is a tailor who goes out to buy raw material for her work. She also narrated the time when she was harassed on her way to Budaana.

“On my way back from Budaana, some boys from a nearby village harassed me. One of them kept his hand on my thigh in the rickshaw. When I objected, he said to me, ‘You are not hot enough to be harrassed’ (Tu itni acchi nahin hai jo hum tujhe chhedenge). They kept harassing me the whole time they were in the rickshaw. When I came home and told my family about the incident, my husband

blamed me instead and abused me physically. I did not eat for three days and kept crying. Still, they blamed me for the incident and didn't let me go to Budhaana. I could not work for several days because of that incident."

Shadina, a Muslim woman who also makes decorative laces for a living, is disliked by the men of her community. They act as if she is a bad influence on their women. They want Muslim women to stay indoors. She is ridiculed for her Muslim identity as well. People from other community treat them as Muslims are responsible for the spread of the coronavirus. They curse the Muslims and discriminate against them in public sphere. She shared an incident when she had gone to collect money from her employer and was harassed by him.

"This one time I had gone to collect money from my employer. A guy grabbed me and tried to snatch away my money from me. He called me an unchaste woman and claimed that I had earned that money through selling my body. My employer (Thekedaar) scolds me a lot if he doesn't like the laces that I make. He calls me names like illiterate (Anpadh), Gawaar etc. He threatens me that he would withhold my payment if he doesn't like the work. I have no option but to take all his nonsense. We are too poor to take a stand against him."

For many women like Shadina and Bilkis, a safe working environment is a thing of fiction. Still, they can't choose to switch or quit their jobs because of their circumstances.

III. Economic Well-Being

Only 1% of the women that were interviewed owned the house that they lived in, and none of them had any cultivable land or any other property in their name. In 99% of the cases, all the property that they owned in their families was owned by a male member (husband or father-in-law). This reflects the economic status of women and how much control they have over the money or property that their family has (if at all). 23% didn't have supply of water at their house and 20% didn't have an electricity connection. 13% of them didn't have a ration card. 39% of them were daily wage earners and didn't have a fixed number of days that they work in a month for. 1% women didn't have a bank account.

Sunita, who works as a labourer at a factory is the single bread earner in her family of seven. She is subjected to domestic violence every day. Her husband doesn't help her run the house. He rather takes money from her to drink alcohol. That way, Sunita doesn't even have the right over the money that she herself earns. This is an ugly reality about majority of women who work in the unorganised sector.

Chanda, a 29-year-old Dalit woman who works as a washer woman is tortured every other day by her in-laws for dowry. When asked if she has ever faced any kind of abuse in her home, she said,

"I am from a poor family. Because my parents were poor, they could not give anything to my in-laws as dowry. That is why, ever since I have come to this family, I have never received love. My husband and my mother-in-law beat me a lot over dowry. They used to tell me I will never have kids, and when I got pregnant, my brother-in-law and my mother-in-law threw me out of the house. When I got pregnant for the second time, they spilled kerosene over me to burn and kill me. I somehow escaped and went to my mother's house. My husband used to encourage my brother-in-law to kill me. He used to say, "go kill her, I will fight the case.". Whenever I went to my mother's house, my husband came to take me back. And then whenever I got pregnant again, they started beating me again so that they don't have to bear the expenses of my pregnancy."

Meera works as a domestic help and she is victim of domestic violence like thousands of other women in North India. Her husband earns some money but ends up spending all on alcohol leaving nothing for family. This has resulted in Meera working at multiple houses to satisfy bare minimum needs of her family.

Pushpa, a 35-year-old Dalit woman, works at the vegetable market (mandi). She separates good vegetables from the bad ones. Her body is partially paralyzed. She works at the mandi every day for 6 hours. But she has to give whatever she earns to her husband.

“When I was 5-year-old, half of my body was paralysed. My parents tried to get it treated but I could not recover. My husband has a problem in his backbone. Both of us can’t do laborious jobs. I have to give all of what I earn to my husband. He decides how it would be spent. If I refuse to give him money, he fights a lot with me and abuses me verbally.”

During Covid-19 lockdown Bindu had to sell all her jewellery for her husband’s treatment and her source of income was nil. The children had to go to sleep without food for many days. Finally, her husband died and now she is left with nothing. She is 35-year-old and has 2 kids to raise on her own. She has a small shop near her house in which she sells articles of daily needs like toothpaste, grocery items like biscuits, etc. At the time of the interview, her shop was shut and she was suffering from depression.

IV. Impact of COVID-19

Impact Within Their Homes

With the whole country going into a lockdown, a lot of workers in the unorganised sector lost their jobs. With major job losses and income losses, the workers had a hard time surviving the lockdown inside their homes.

Rekha, who works at a brick kiln along with her husband, shared how they survived the lockdown,

“For the first month things weren’t that bad because we had some money. We survived on it for one month. But then the situation kept getting worse. We could not even afford vegetables and we were out of food. We received some grains on our ration card. We sold the rice to a shopkeeper and bought spices in lieu of it. We ate salt and Roti with chutney for the whole of the lockdown. We didn’t see milk for almost four months. Whenever my youngest daughter asked for tea, I mixed some jaggery in water and gave her”.

It was hard for people to see their children hungry. Another woman shared her trauma when asked about her life during the lockdown.

“The lockdown has been one of the most difficult times in our lives. We had run out of money completely and had to borrow INR 9000 from a kin. We skipped meals and survived merely on Roti and Salt for days. Sometimes, we used to eat once in two days. I was also diagnosed with TB in the meanwhile and nobody helped us during those hard times. Not even our family. Seeing your children hungry and not being able to do anything about it is the worst feeling ever. I have spent the lockdown crying. We had to skip meals and go hungry so many times during the lockdown that I have lost count. We didn’t have money to buy all the required ration at once. We didn’t have money to buy medicines. It was so painful to see our children hungry. It has given them a lifetime of trauma.”

The lockdown also took a huge physical and mental toll on Javeda as she was often taunted at by her in laws for being a burden upon them. Since all the family members were living inside the house during the lockdown, it was Javeda that all the extra work burden fell upon.

For women working as domestic help, the fate was in the hands of their employers. Most of the domestic workers were fired from their jobs for as long as the lockdown continued. Only a few of them were called back to their jobs post-lockdown. Sanju Devi, who worked as a domestic worker before the lockdown, shared her ordeal-

“My employers asked me to stop coming to work during the lockdown. However, I told them that I will starve if they fire me. Three of them agreed to let me go to their place once in three days and they did not even deduct my salary. They paid me the full amount and gave some grocery items like rice and flour to me as well.”

While we assume that public transport had no good use during the lockdown, there are people like Shabana who were walking to work each day. Shabana walks 20 km to the hospital to sweep the floors, change diapers and sanitary pads on the admitted people, change bed sheets and pillow covers and wash them in the washing machine. She then collects the dried bed sheets and irons them. For new patients, she prepares the beds and other necessary items. She has to take care of overall cleanliness in the hospital wards. All for INR 4000 per month.

“During the lockdown, it became really difficult for me to commute to work. The public transport was closed and magic cars (a kind of taxi) were also not running. I had to walk 20 km to Bijnor to work each day. At times, the police stopped me but when I told them I work at the hospital, they let me go. My work didn’t stop during the lockdown. But commutation was a major issue for me during the lockdown. Another major problem was that the shopkeepers had started selling food items at double prices. It was really hard to afford meals for everybody with my salary. There is nobody else in my family who earns.”

For migrant labourers, the condition was worse off. They did not even get to go home. They were stuck away from home having no money and nowhere to go. The women who work at brick kilns often move away from their homes and villages and stay in temporary huts at the brick kiln for 6-7 months when the kiln is functional. Sarojini Devi and her husband work at a brick kiln and they were stuck there when the lockdown was imposed. Brick Kiln was totally shut down during the period and no compensation was provided by owner of brick kiln during the period. Whenever they tried to work at kiln, policeman would come and destroy her work and threaten all workers. When asked about the situation, Sarojini Devi said,

“Me and my husband were at the brick kiln when the lockdown was imposed and our children were there back at home. We could not see our children for months and there was no way to contact them. Our work at the brick kiln had stopped and there, our children were stuck without much money. We were so worried for our children. We counted days for the lockdown to end.”

For women who were stuck inside their homes, the situation wasn’t good either. It has been observed that the instances of domestic violence on women shot up during the lockdown. Shivani, a 34-year-old Dalit woman was stuck inside her abusive home when the lockdown was imposed. She has been subjected to cruelty and domestic violence ever since she got married. Her mother-in-law used to keep her hungry for days. She used to go to work at the brick kiln hungry and when she returned home, her in-laws and husband abused and beat her together. She said while sharing her ordeal,

“They used to beat me every day and made me do all the household work. They treated me like a servant and abused me. I used to go to bed hungry and cried to my sleep. But nobody ever bothered to ask me why I was crying.”

During the lockdown, the instances of domestic violence on Shivani increased even more.

“I live under constant stress. I don’t see any escape from this life that I am trapped in. Sometimes, I feel like dying and ending it all. But then I think about my children. Both me and my husband lost our jobs when the lockdown was imposed. My husband was frustrated that I wasn’t working and used to beat me every other day and abuse me mentally. He never acknowledged the amount of work I did at the brick kiln and home before the lockdown. He beat me just because I couldn’t find work for 4-5 months during the lockdown.”

While these people were struggling to put two meals on their plates each day, they lived under constant fear from the police. Blikis shared how she used to live under constant pressure when her son was out to earn.

“I lost my work during the lockdown. We had almost run out of money. That is when I bought some plastic goods like mugs, buckets etc and sent my son out every day to sell them. He earned about INR 50 per day through the sales. We survived on that money during the lockdown. I used to worry for my son whenever I saw police in my area. They could have locked him up. I was so under stress during that period that I used to have a low blood pressure all the time.”

Impact on Work

89% of the women that were interviewed had lost their jobs during the first lockdown. 98% faced income loss, 86% lost it by 100%.

77% of the women that we interviewed had borrowed money from their kin or a landlord during the lockdown. So far (at the time of interview), only 2 of them have been able to re-pay it. After the lockdown was uplifted, there were lesser restrictions on movement. Majority of them had been able to return to work. However, a major chunk of their earnings is now consumed in repaying the debt. All in all, they are in a worse off condition than they were, before the lockdown.

A lot of women go to work on the fields of landlords when they have no other job. The work on the fields is mostly on a daily-wage basis and is non-permanent in nature. It has been observed that a lot of women who could not resume their work post-lockdown were now working at farms. Palli is a 50-year-old Dalit woman who sells buffalo milk for a living. Whenever there is a chance, she goes to a nearby farm to work.

“I go to work at a nearby farm whenever there is some work available for me. I spend 7-8 hours at the farm sowing seeds and saplings or harvesting the crop (as per the demand of the employer). I earn INR 200 per day at the farm.”

Pushpa, who worked at a vegetable market before the lockdown has now stopped going to the *Mandi* and goes to work at a farm instead.

“After the lockdown, the mandi has re-opened. However, the workload at the mandi has increased and there is no increase in the pay. This is why, I don’t go to the mandi anymore. I go to a nearby field with my parents-in-law and do whatever work is needed to be done at the farm. In return, I get some food grains and hay for my animals.” Said Pushpa when asked about her work post-lockdown.

Just like Palli and Pushpa, there are a lot of women and men who go to work on the fields when they have no other work.

The COVID-19 lockdown entailed increased trouble for a lot of women stuck in their abusive homes.

Shivani, a 30-year-old Dalit woman recalling her experience of domestic violence by her husband during the lockdown, said;

“My husband was frustrated that I wasn’t working and used to abuse me physically and mentally. He never acknowledged the amount of work I did at the brick kiln and home before the lockdown. He beat me just because I couldn’t find work for 4-5 months during the lockdown. We received ration kits from an NGO which we survived on. We also received some ration from the PDS ration dealer. We only ate rice for eight months because we did not have wheat. We did not receive any medical help from the government hospital. Rather, when we took my ailing son to the hospital, they tuned us down and refused to check him. I had to borrow money from a friend to buy him medicines from a nearby medical shop. I had also taken a loan of INR 50000 on 4% interest during the lockdown. We still haven’t been able to re-pay it because all of our earnings get consumed in our day-to-day expenses.”

Khursheeda, a 45-year-old Muslim woman who makes rugs for a living has been short on work ever since the lockdown has been lifted.

“Not many women come to get rugs made from me anymore. My husband gets frustrated because of the money crunch and fights me to vent out his frustration”.

As the restrictions on movement eased, a lot of them were able to return to work. However, majority of them have a long way to go in order to get their lives back on track. They are facing payment delays by their employers. Number of people looking for work have risen and the work is scarce.

Soniya, a 22-year-old Dalit woman from Muzaffarnagar has been having a hard time at work post-lockdown. She told the interviewer,

“After the lockdown was lifted, I got my job again. The major problem with my work post-lockdown is that there is so much of unemployment that my employer can find a replacement for me even if I fail to go to work for a single day. There is no job security at all. I have to go to work even if its raining. Taking any sort of leave from work is an absolute NO. I might be fired for even a single day’s leave.”

Just like many other women who worked as tailors from their homes, Shabana too has not been getting many orders anymore. Post-lockdown, she has resumed her work but now she can even go 5-6 days without work. There is very little work available now. Whenever any urgent need of money arises, she and her husband have to borrow it from somebody. They have run out of all the little money that they had saved. Her employer keeps delaying her payment ever since the lockdown has been uplifted. Her husband goes to sell clothes on a pushcart. He makes INR 80-90 per day. Their living conditions are worse off than they were before the lockdown.

Santosh, who worked as a domestic help prior to the lockdown, now works as a mid-wife because all her employers stopped calling her during the lockdown and she was left with no work.

For some people, technological advancement might be synonymous to ‘development’. But for people like Shabnam, it might mean the loss of their means of livelihood. She used to do the work of

zari (a kind of embroidery done by a fine golden fibre). However, her employer has now fired her because he has purchased a machine for the work.

“Now machines have replaced people like me. The machines can do the zari work in no time and nobody wants to waste time getting *zari* done from us. I have not been able to find any other work as well. I have been going to a beauty parlour to work as an assistant. They’re paying me INR 3000 per month. The money is far from enough to run a family of four people.”

For women like Bindu who had their small businesses running prior to the lockdown, it has now become difficult to get their businesses going as they have run out of capital to fund their businesses. Bindu used to run a small ration shop which has now closed. She says that she cannot afford to buy all the articles of her shop and customers prefer buying groceries from a shop offering a wide range of products at one place. Pre Covid-19 her shop was working fine as she had savings to stock products in the shop. But now her savings have been exhausted and she has run out of money.

Chaanmati, a Musahar woman from Kushinagar, has a small tea stall which was closed down due to lockdown and local police was visiting place daily to implement lockdown of shops including hers. She had to ask for help around the village but no one was willing to provide loan or any other financial assistance to her family.

Lockdown was hard on housemaids as most of families employing housemaids asked them to not come for work for 2-3 months resulting in no earning for them.

While a lot of people stayed indoors during the lockdown, sanitation workers didn’t have the privilege of spending the lockdown within the safe confines of their homes. They had to risk their lives just to put food on their plates.

Lalita Devi, a Dalit woman who cleans toilets in people’s homes did not see a big difference in her work because of the lockdown. On being asked if her work was on during the lockdown, she said,

“The lockdown did not affect my work much. There was restriction on movement but still I was called to clean toilets like usual. I used to go once in every 2-3 to clean toilets.”

Impact on Mental Health

43% of the women that were interviewed said that they were suffering from mental stress. All of them were having problems related to money and were worried about the rumours of second wave of COVID-19. They felt helpless about the situation and had a lot of pent-up frustration within them.

Sabra, who made decorative laces for a living before the lockdown, lost her job when the lockdown came into effect. Due to this whole situation of the pandemic, sabra suffered through a lot of mental stress as there was no work and the money was tight. She told that sometimes, she used to beat her kids out of anger and frustration.

Working as a labourer at a brick kiln is one of the most daunting jobs a person can do. The laborers keep working for 18-19 hours at the brick kiln. Sudheshna, a-42-year-old Dalit woman, who works at a brick kiln said,

“I have to constantly keep working from 4 in the morning till 11 at night. I get very frustrated due to the workload on me. I often vent it out on my kids. I used to get so frustrated that I beat my kids. We were so short on money that we skipped meals and ate just rice for 8 months. ”

Santosh, who worked as a domestic help prior to the lockdown got fired during the lockdown. Now, she does her household chores all day and gets to sleep for six hours at night. Her mental health is worsening because of stress. She hopes that her children manage to find work somewhere.

Naresha is a 36-year-old Dalit widowed woman could not open her small bangle shop during the lockdown has the responsibility of raising three kids on her own. She ran out of money during the lockdown and had to borrow money from her relatives for her family's survival. While narrating her ordeal, she said,

"I live under constant stress. I have a huge debt on my shoulders and on top of that, I have the responsibility of raising three kids. I have to pay for their school fees and what not. I don't see any escape from this life and I feel trapped. Sometimes, I feel like dying and ending it all. But then I think about my children and stop."

Shabnam, who did zari (a type of embroidery done with a fine golden thread) before the lockdown for a living said she was suicidal during the lockdown.

"I lost my job during the lockdown and we were slowly running out of money and food items. I was so under pressure that I had lost all hope to live. But some people from my neighbours stepped up to help me and gave me some food items. I also received some ration kits from the government. That helped a lot to survive the lockdown. Still, I had to borrow INR 10000 from a neighbour to buy food staples. Thankfully, nobody in my family got sick during the lockdown."- Shabnam- zari work

Hadisa, a 42-year-old Muslim woman who made decorative laces for a living prior to the lockdown, lost her job during the lockdown. She faced a major money crunch and was out of food staples and ration.

"I used to cry seeing my children cry for food. It is the worst thing that can happen to you as a parent."

Help from Government

37% of the women that were interviewed said that they received some sort of help from the government during the lockdown. Mostly, food grains on their ration cards.

"I received some free ration on my ration card during the lockdown. Majorly, it was rice. So, it is all we had to eat during the lockdown. I used to cook rice in water and everybody ate it with salt." Said Khursheeda, who stitches clothes for a living.

There were some women who were getting pension under the widow pension scheme. Two women said that they received INR 3000 on their MGNREGA card during the lockdown.

Some had received INR 25000 under the housing scheme Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. (PMAY)

V. Effect of 2013 Muzaffarnagar Riots

12 of the women who were interviewed were affected by the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots. All of them had fled their homes and had to re-settle in displaced colonies. They had to leave behind everything and start their lives again from the scratch. They say that ever since the riots have happened, their population in their region has become polarised and now they carry the stigma of being Muslims.

Bilkis recalled her experience-

"In 2013 horrific riots happened in Muzaffarnagar. A curfew was imposed throughout the city. In our village Sisauli, there were only a few Muslim families. There were rumours that 8 Muslim men were slaughtered in a nearby village. I was terrified for me and my kids. The Jaats in my village were

threatening to kill all the Muslims. I somehow escaped the village with my kids and went to my brother's place for refuge. For the next few months, we lived in camps that didn't even have walls. They were made of plastic sheets. The memories of that time still haunt me. Those were the worst days of my life. There were no toilets or bathrooms in the camps. It was humiliating to bathe outside the camps in open. I used to bathe once in 15 days that too at night when nobody could see me. I always lived under the suspicion that somebody would grab me from behind and do something wrong with me. After much struggle, we got a little space from the Madarssa on which we built our small hut. I have faced all sorts of abuse during that time."

Bilkis lives in a kaccha house which is built on a space provided by the Madarssa. She doesn't own any property or cultivable land. However, before the 2013 riots, they had a house of their own.

Aasiya, who now stitches clothes for a living, told that she has been harassed by the police. According to her, the police tried to pressure them to return back to their villages where the riots had happened.

"Riot time was horrible for us we had to run away from our villages, our houses were burnt down to ashes, we lost everything. We started living at slums at Basikula area only to be forced by local people to shift from there. Then we shifted to relief camp where the situation was equally threatening and grim. Administration was very harsh on us, in instance of any crime in area, we use to be first suspect for police. Police continuously tried to pressurise us to return to our villages where we stayed before riots. During chilling winters, many people tried to help us by giving blankets and other amenities but they faced hurdles from administration as well as local strongman. Our camps were often visited by Local Leaders who forced us to take back our police complaints of riots but we refused."

Aasiya's family got little help from government in form of 5 lakhs INR but it is not comparable to what her family has lost. Her family and thousand others victims of riots are traumatised by violence which was perpetrated by people who have been living with each other for generations. She regrets that even in such state of fear she and her husband had to make efforts to find work as people from her village were not ready to provide loan or help riot affected families in any other way. Aasiya faced very difficult times during riots and still is in process of rebuilding her life.

On being asked if the process of getting the 5 lakh rupee compensation from the government was easy for them, Munaajara shared her experience-

"We were given a compensation of Rs. 5 lakh by the government after the 2013 riots. But for that also, we had to face a lot of trouble. The officers and authorities turned their backs on us. The police also taunted us and told us that we should just give up and return to our villages. Ever since the riots have happened, our lives have only kept getting worse."

The women said that ever since the riots happened, the people from the Muslim community don't get work anymore. Further, the police also keep invading their privacy.

"We had nowhere to go when the riots happened in 2013. We were fearing for our lives. For many days, we lived in temporary camps in Hussainpur village. We survived on food and clothing given to us in charity. Ever since the riots, we have been having a hard time finding work because of our Muslim identity. most of the land and resources are owned by the Hindu Jaats who despise us. Even the Muslim landowners fear employing us because of our identity. All the people in positions of power are against our community and everybody surrenders to them. We live in constant fear. We

fear for our life and safety. Majority of the people in our society are daily-wage labourers. We miss our village and our old life.”

“We were given a compensation of Rs. 5 lakh by the government after the 2013 riots. But for that also, we had to face a lot of trouble. The officers and authorities turned their backs on us. The police also taunted us and told us that we should just give up and return to our villages. Ever since the riots have happened, our lives have only kept getting worse.” She added.

When asked if the police cooperate with them, Sajida pointed,

“The police raid our homes whenever they please. They even tried to convince us to withdraw our cases. I don’t know why the police give in to political pressure.”

None of them have been fully rehabilitated yet. They are doing menial jobs as they are ostracised by the communities of the villages that they have settled into. All of them are working as labourers and not everybody agrees to employ them.

Saajida’s family temporarily lives in a home provided to them by the government. They cannot repair or sell it. They’ve been directed to live in the house until they manage to get their own. They get electricity and two hours of water supply at their house provided by the government.

VI. Conclusion and Suggestions

The workers worked in different sectors and dedicated different number of hours per day to their job. However, all of the women who were interviewed had the responsibility of taking care of the household work along with their jobs. In all the cases, they either did it alone or were helped by other female members in the family. All in all, they worked twice as much as their male counterparts. It was even observed that at some places, they do the same amount of work on their jobs as their male counterparts, but still they are paid less for the same amount of work. 32% of the women said they had faced some sort of abuse within their families (physical, verbal, financial). At workplace too, they were found to be subjected to caste atrocities, wage gap, sexual harassment etc. 21% of the women were the sole breadwinners in their families. This shows how the structure of economy within a family unit stands on the hard work of women. Yet, they are not given any credit for their role.

Only 1% of the women that were interviewed owned the house that they lived in, and none of them had any cultivable land or any other property in their name. In 99% of the cases, all the property that they owned in their families was owned by a male member (husband or father-in-law). This reflects the economic status of women and how much control they have over the money or property that their family has (if at all).

With the whole country going into a lockdown, a lot of workers in the unorganised sector lost their jobs. With major job losses and income losses, the workers had a hard time surviving the lockdown inside their homes. 89% of the women that were interviewed had lost their jobs during the first lockdown. 98% faced income loss, 86% lost it by 100%.

77% of the women that we interviewed had borrowed money from their kin or a landlord during the lockdown. So far (at the time of interview), only 2 of them have been able to re-pay it. After the lockdown was uplifted, there were lesser restrictions on movement. 43% of the women that were interviewed said that they were suffering from mental stress. All of them were having problems

related to money and were worried about the rumours of second wave of COVID-19. They felt helpless about the situation and had a lot of pent-up frustration within them.

Majority of the women had been able to return to work. However, a major chunk of their earnings is now consumed in repaying the debt and other liabilities that have arose due to the lockdown. All in all, they are in a worse off condition than they were, before the lockdown.

Suggestion

Need for Legal Protection

The parliament is looking to consolidate around 44 labour laws under four “codes”. These are: Code on Wages, Code on Industrial Relations, Code on Social Security, Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, and the Industrial Relations Code. The purpose is to remove overlap between the laws and make it easier for employers to comply with the laws and file mandatory returns and reports. These codes fail to include “hidden workers” such as domestic help, home-based workers, those working in small sweatshops, daily wage-earners who have not registered anywhere, etc.

A plethora of laws have already been passed for the protection of labour rights. The utility of a law depends on how well it has been implemented on ground. A lot of laws and schemes to provide social security and welfare benefits to unorganised workers have not been implemented “in letter and spirit”.

There is a need for a law that focuses on the social security of workers in the unorganised sector. Most informal workers do not have evidence of an employer-employee relationship. Without an appointment letter, they can’t try for bank loans, apply for school admission for their children, etc. the law should make it mandatory for an employer to issue a letter of employment.

Annexures