

RESEARCH REPORT 2026

Impact of COVID-19's Men's Reverse Migration on Female's Labour Market Opportunities.

A study conducted in
Bundelkhand & Rajasthan

— SUPPORTED BY

Azim Premji University (APU)



Introduction

In public memory and popular discourse, the COVID-19 pandemic has faded as it moves to other issues of pressing concern and relevance. However, the devastating social and economic impacts of the pandemic are still prevalent among the poorest segments of the population. One such domain, which was significantly affected, was India's already abysmal female labour participation rate. According to a report in August 2021, India's female labour participation rate decreased to 16.1% in the July–September 2020 quarter. These statistics are immensely worrying as pre-COVID, India already had one of the lowest female labour force participation rates (FLFPR) in the world.

Given this context, this study examined the immediate impact and medium- and long-term ripple effects on women's labour market opportunities, income levels, and transitions from paid to unpaid work. There have been a few studies in India (*Behera, Mishra & Behera, 2018; Dandekar & Ghai, 2020*) which focus on the impact of men's reverse migration on villages in general, but there has been hardly any focus on its impact on women's labour market opportunities and paid work.

Research Methodology

The primary research question of this study was:

What has been the impact of the permanent reverse migration of male workers on rural women’s labour market opportunities?

This question has been further unpacked into three sub-questions:

1. What has been the impact of men’s permanent reverse migration on women’s labour market opportunities after the **COVID-19** second wave?
2. In what ways has this migration and rise in the availability of the male labour force affected the wages and income levels of women?
3. Are there any major shifts for women from paid labour work to unpaid domestic/agricultural (on their lands) care work due to this migration?

Methodological Approach	Rationale	Outcomes
Macro-Level (Phase 1)	Identifying large-scale patterns around the issue.	Macro-level patterns on reverse migration due to COVID-19 & the general narrative on women's labour opportunities and wages – data from 2033 HHs across 100 villages.
Meso-Level (Phase 2)	Studying the issue at a community level, their interactions with each other & differences.	Patterns and insights on how COVID-19 and reverse migration affected employment opportunities and wages for women over time – 600 HHs across 3 districts, Sarpanch, rural healthcare workers (ASHA, Anganwadi).
Micro-Level (Phase 3)	Examining issues at an individual level, focusing on their experiences, roles, responsibilities, and identities.	Insights and data on individual women, their experience with COVID-19 about employment and how they have been affected due to the reverse migration of men – 30 women from 3 districts.

Results & Findings

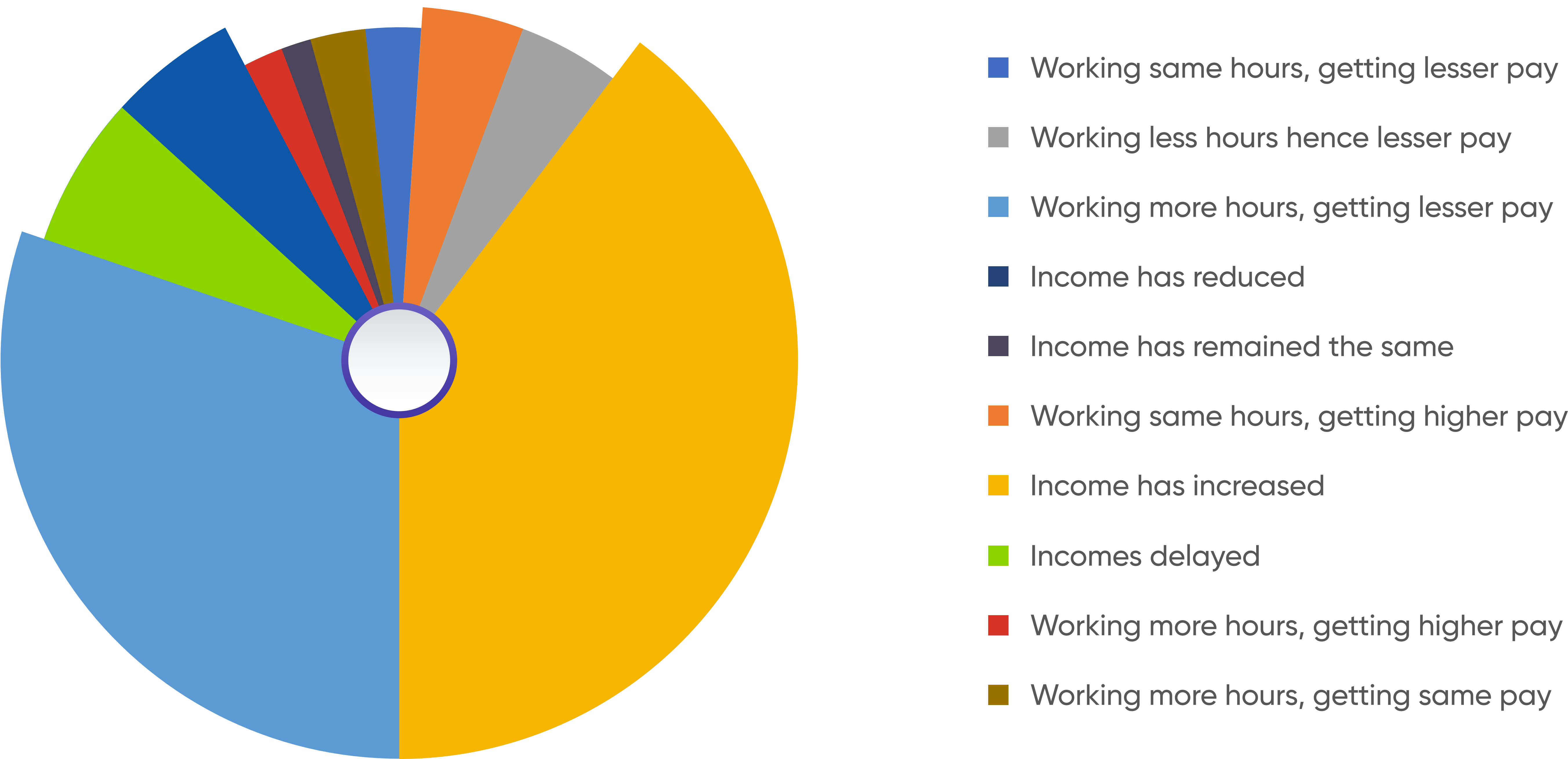
Livelihood Opportunities in the Villages

Most of the villagers are engaged in work under **MNREGA**. Under this government scheme, both men and women are entitled to the same fixed rate. The rate, however, varied across the districts and villages. Most of the individuals spoke of **Rs. 300** being the rate, whereas a few also mentioned getting **Rs. 250**. The local work undertaken in the villages, however, saw a major difference in wages given to the genders. In all districts, there was a difference of **Rs. 50** – while the women got **Rs. 250**, the men earned **Rs. 300**.

The Gendered Nature of Work

‘Men are usually given more physically demanding work. The work given to women is softer, and they are paid **50 rupees** less. There is no boundary set for them. Those who have men in their households to earn can manage, but those who do not have any earning members need to work. So, they bring their children to work as well. They take care of their children at work and feed them milk, which can be time-consuming. ‘Their work is extra; that is why there is a difference,’ responded a *Pradhan from Chitrakoot*.

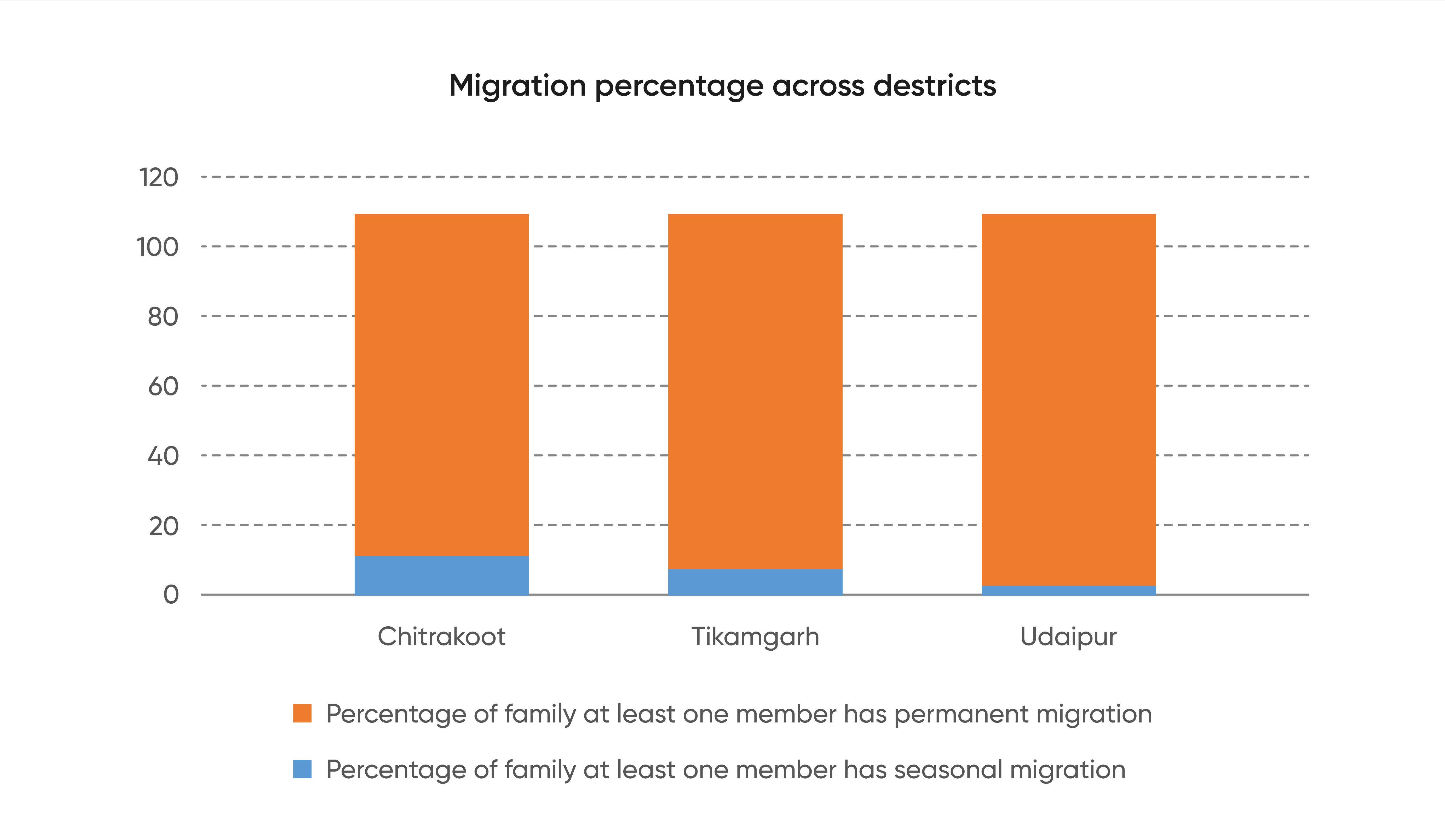
Effect of Covid-19 on income (Overall)



Speaking to *ASHA & Anganwadi* workers from a village in *Chitrakoot*, they expressed that ‘the difference in wages occurs because one is a woman and the other is a man. That’s why there is a difference. Both of their work are not considered equal. The man’s work is considered to have more value.’

Reasons for Decreased Income	Overall	Chitrakoot	Tikamgarh	Udaipur
A family member lost a job	15.00	18.96	7.97	26.27
Reduced wage rate/price of the produce	36.30	33.86	33.49	55.93
Reduced hours/days of work	82.70	94.13	82.69	39.83
Illness/Fatality at home/Covid	7.90	12.19	5.47	0.85
Agricultural output reduced	10.40	11.29	11.16	4.24
Faced issues in selling agricultural produce	13.30	18.74	9.57	6.78
Livestock prices reduced	1.40	1.13	1.37	2.54
Other	1.10	0.00	2.51	0.00
N	1000	443	439	118

Effect of Covid-19 on income (Overall)



In most households, the main migrating member was the man of the house. In several cases – *especially in Tikamgarh and Chitrakoot* – we noticed that some men take their wives and young children along with them. In *Udaipur*, however, there was a dismal representation of women amongst the migrant population. Several respondents complained that children's education was suffering because of migration. A few even spoke of parents increasing their children's age to 18 on official documents so that they can work alongside them in urban areas.

The growing climate crisis makes agriculture an unviable profession. Some respondents complained of having land but not the resources for agricultural production. Erratic rainfall patterns and increased heat waves make the land unsuitable for proper yield.

'Today's young boys do not want to work in agriculture and the fields. They are not interested in working in the sun. That's why they leave.' *'Mostly the younger generation leaves home to work outside.'*

Most of the respondents expressed their discontentment with daily wage labour and how uncertain the work is. 'There is the availability of work for 100 days based on the requirement. *'What would a person do for the remaining 265 days?'* commented a Pradhan from Tikamgarh.

Caste and Migration

Trying to ascertain whether individuals from a particular caste migrate more, the respondents commented that those belonging to the SC (Scheduled Caste) community tend to migrate more. With little to no land of their own and lesser bargaining power, the members of this community have no choice but to engage in migration. Additionally, insights from *Chitrakoot* helped us understand that certain tribes – *Kol tribes* – engage in migration more. Those belonging to Brahmin families are rarely seen engaging in migration.

'There is a certain social status that some families ascribe to. They do not want to work as labourers, as they don't want to be known as labourers with a lower economic status. Their value in society might decrease because of this.'

– Sarpanch, Tikamgarh

availability of labour work in the town near *Chitrakoot*, women are not allowed to work in any area apart from their village owing to societal gender-based restrictions.

Caste permeates in deciding who will work or not. Usually, those belonging to the upper castes (*Thakurs* – as mentioned in an interview) have access to education, and monetary and productive resources – and therefore, the nature of their work differs. The respondents believed that the women of the upper castes did not 'have' to work – because of their elevated status in society.

'Mentality is that in the upper castes, they think that if the wife is going to earn, it means the husband is living on her earnings. It is an insult. In higher society, whether a woman is educated or not, suppose she wants to do some work – she will not even go against the family.'

– Pradhan from Chitrakoot.

Left Behind Wives: Work Undertaken

There exists a crisis in finding suitable employment for women – usually seen as cheap labour – they are either hired at lower rates – or not chosen to be employed as male labourers are preferred over female ones. 'Women have no jobs available. What will they do? They do farming and household chores, that's it. There is no work available.' 'There is labour work, but they don't go to *Manikpur* for it.' While there is

'They don't let their wives go outside – saying, what will they do outside? Four people will look at them and say that their wife is working. It exists in the lower castes too. Some women's husbands do not let them go outside,'

– An ASHA worker from Chitrakoot.

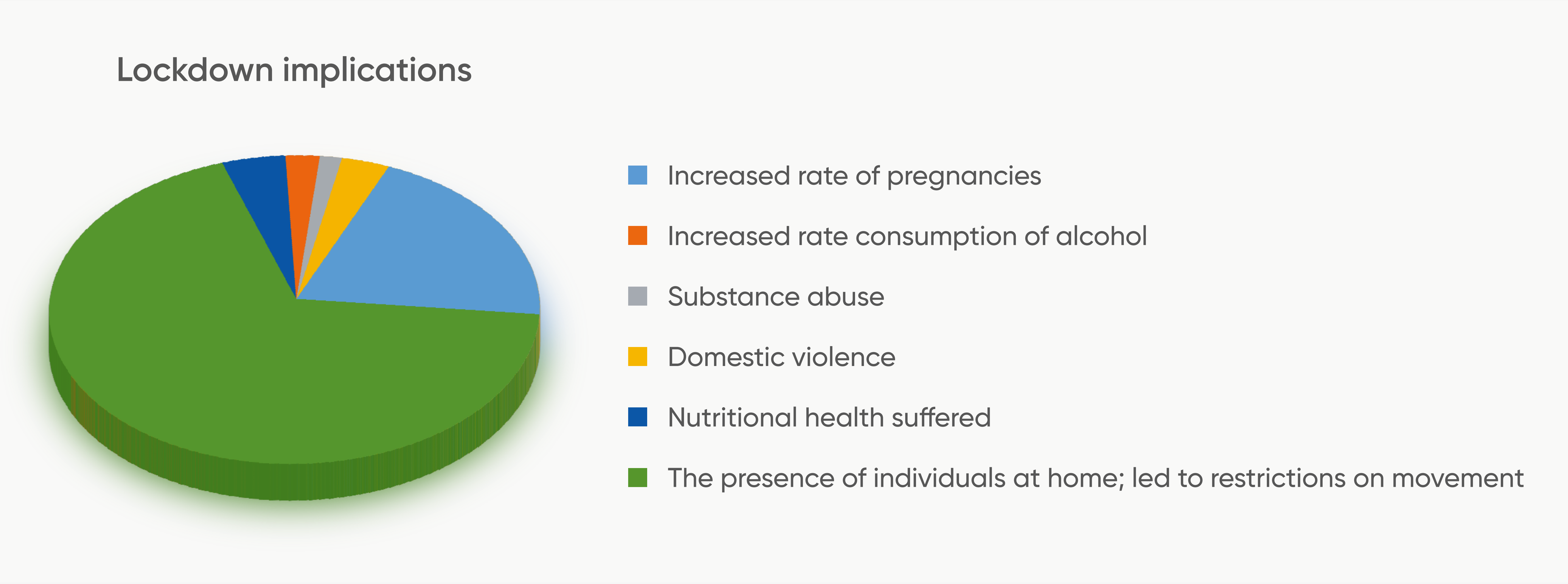
Effect of Covid-19 on income (Overall)

Returned to the village post Covid-19	Overall	Chitrakoot	Tikamgarh	Udaipur
Yes, returned permanently	4.87	3.54	4.88	6.79
Yes, returned initially and now migrated again.	14.71	9.97	16.57	17.33
Yes, returned/back multiple times, but went back at the moment	29.12	37.14	18.8	41.22
Yes, returned/back multiple times, but remain at home at the moment	50.91	49.35	59.15	34.19
No, they did not return	0.39	0.00	0.6	0.47
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
N	2033	622	984	427

On being asked whether individuals adopted alternative means of livelihood during the time, several responses were similar. ‘They need money to open *kirana* (grocery) shops, but there is no money. For those who had any means, the lockdown stopped them. Even if he opens a shop during COVID, where will the customers come from? There is no question of development. Development had stopped during the pandemic.’

Household Chores

We received polarising views on whether women believed their household chores increased or decreased during reverse migration. While a few spoke of how the return of their husbands increased the workload, another lot mentioned facing a sense of relief - as the chores were now divided between the two. A major proportion of individuals also reported how the workload always remains the same, come what may.





Paid Labour Opportunities

When speaking of paid labour work, all female respondents shied away from answering about the work they do in terms of wages. They responded dismissively – *'kuch nahi karti houn'* (I do not do any work), thereby undermining the value and nature of their labour.

All respondents began their sentences with the aforementioned statement – listing out all paid work they are involved in. Such is the nature of the invisibilisation of women's work; not only within the household, but in the public sphere too. So deeply is it entrenched, that it enters the very psyche of women – leading to an internalization of their victimisation.

One such respondent answered, *'kuch nahi karti houn, buss time pass. School chalti jaati houn padhane ke liye.'* (I do not do any work, only pass the time. I go to the school to teach.) The respondent earns **2000 rupees per month** – however, refused to acknowledge it as being of any significance. Before this, she used to work in a fabric company as a saleswoman which was shut down during the pandemic. It was during the pandemic that she became a teacher.

Left Behind Women; Empowering or a Compulsion?

In many households, a woman's movement is restricted – and depends upon the presence of a male member. A few women are allowed to work in paid labour, whereas some are denied the right to do so because of societal/caste-based constraints.

Migration – in this manner, sometimes allows women to participate in occupations traditionally associated with men.

A majority of women believed that there was no sense of accomplishment. The work undertaken by them during this period is because of *'majburi'* (compulsion). Since no one else is present at home, they automatically become the ones carrying out both paid and unpaid labour. The women we spoke to felt a sense of despair and helplessness. Speaking of how bad they felt for their husbands, they expressed how migration, too, is a compulsion. The lack of job opportunities and a regular source of income in the villages forces their husbands to leave.



Recommendations & Suggestions for Future Research

The low opportunity cost associated with unpaid domestic and care work perpetuates the undervaluation of women's labor in both the household and the broader economy. Despite shouldering a significant burden of agricultural and household labor, women often lack ownership rights, decision-making authority, and access to financial resources. This not only diminishes their economic autonomy but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and dependency. The absence of recognition for the immense contribution of women's unpaid work further marginalizes their status within society and undermines efforts towards gender equality and social inclusion.

At the household level, entrenched patriarchal norms dictate women's roles and responsibilities, influencing their access to education, employment, and decision-making authority. Community dynamics, including caste-based hierarchies and social networks, further shape women's opportunities and constraints within local labour markets. Meanwhile, broader structural factors, such as economic policies, institutional frameworks, and cultural norms, have a strong influence on women's empowerment and economic participation at the state and national levels.

We argue that it is imperative to adopt a holistic approach that addresses the underlying structural inequalities and systemic barriers. Policy interventions should prioritize investments in education, vocational training, and healthcare infrastructure to enhance women's capabilities and expand their economic opportunities. Additionally, efforts to promote gender-sensitive labour laws, social protection mechanisms, and financial inclusion initiatives can empower women to assert their rights and negotiate fair wages and working conditions. Moreover, challenging entrenched gender norms and promoting cultural shifts towards greater gender equality are essential for fostering inclusive and sustainable development.



About the Authors



Stutilina Pal

Stutilina Pal brings both depth and direction to her role as Program Director at SRIJAN, where she has been influencing systems since 2006. With a foundation in Agriculture from the Odisha University of Agriculture and Technology and a Master's in Gender and Development from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex—where she was awarded the Chevening Fellowship in 2016—her work is rooted in ground realities and theory. Her interests flow through questions of local governance, water security, and gender, converging in her leadership of SRIJAN's knowledge management, research, and communication efforts.



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Prarthana Lumba works at the intersection of exploration and impact as a Project Executive in the Research Vertical at SRIJAN. Her research pursuits weave through questions of gender, sexual and reproductive health, power and governance, and the many textures of culture. Rooted in a Bachelor's degree in History from the University of Delhi and deepened by a Master's in Women's Studies from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad, her work reflects a commitment to understanding and reimagining the worlds we inhabit.



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Devanik is currently a Lecturer in Public Health at the University of Greenwich, a position he has held since July 2024. His research focuses on Gender and Intersectionality, Men and Masculinities, Maternal and Reproductive Health, Migration Health, Global Health Security, as well as Education and International Development.

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