

COVID likely to lock India's women out of job market for years



A woman sweeps next to the site of a redevelopment work of the so-called Central Vista project in New Delhi [File: Sajjad Hussain/AFP]

New Delhi, August 4 (RHC)-- Savitri Devi has been searching for work since she lost her job at a garment factory in India's capital New Delhi, along with half her coworkers, when sales plummeted at the start of the coronavirus pandemic last year.

The 44-year-old has tried her luck repeatedly – and unsuccessfully – near her home in Okhla, an industrial hub with thousands of small factories and workshops, where there was previously plenty of unskilled jobs for women.

“I am ready to take a salary cut but there is no work,” Devi said outside her one-room home in a slum of about 100 families, just a few kilometres away from Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s office.

Devi is one of approximately 15 million Indians who have been made redundant in an economic slowdown that has hit women disproportionately, trade union and industry leaders said. Most employed women in India are in low-skilled work, such as farm and factory labour and domestic help, sectors that have been hit hard by the pandemic.

That has been worsened by an anticipated slow economic recovery, the closure of thousands of factories and a sluggish vaccination rate, which affects women more. These factors are expected to undermine their attempts to return to the workforce.

“Whatever social and economic gains Indian women had made in the last decade, it has been largely wiped out during the COVID period,” said Amarjeet Kaur, general secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress, one of the largest trade unions in India.

The second wave of the coronavirus pandemic is expected to deepen economic stress in India, which was already in its worst recession for 70 years. With the vast majority of Indians working in the informal sector, precise estimates of job losses are difficult.

But in a country without a comprehensive welfare system or pandemic-related support for small businesses, several industry bodies have reported widespread redundancies over the past year.

The Consortium of Indian Industries (CIA), which represents more than one million small firms, said women make up 60 percent of the job losses. A report by the Centre for Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University found that 47 percent of women workers who lost their job between March and December – before the second wave of the virus hit in April – were made permanently redundant.

That compared with about 7 percent of male workers, many of whom were able to either return to their old jobs or take up independent work such as selling vegetables.

The Reuters news agency spoke with more than 50 women in New Delhi, the industrial state of Gujarat and, by phone, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. All had lost their jobs in small garment factories, food processing units, travel agencies and schools, leading them to scrimp and save.

“We have cut down spending on milk, vegetables, clothes ... everything,” said Devi, who, along with her day-labourer husband supports an unemployed son and an aged mother.

In Okhla, home to makers of garments, car parts and food packaging, employers say they have almost halved their workforce following a dip in orders and a rise in input costs such as transport and steel.

Chetan Singh Kohli, a printing material manufacturer and an official of Okhla’s factory owners’ association, said the auxiliary nature of a typical woman’s role meant they were not priorities for reemployment.

“The majority of female workers who work in low-skilled categories like packaging and on assembly lines at lower wages would be the last ones to get employed, as first, we want to restart operations,” he said.

India’s informal service sector, including on-demand services like transport and food delivery, has been one of the few bright spots during the pandemic, said Manisha Kapoor, a researcher at the Institute for Competitiveness think-tank but were dominated by men. “Those informal sector jobs are not something

that women will be taking up,” Kapoor said.

Kaur warned it could take two or three years for women to return to the workforce – if at all – and urged the government to offer incentives to lure them back. “Migrant women workers, who have left for their villages with families after job losses, are unlikely to come back,” she said.

India’s female-to-male share of housework is among the highest in the world and women are bearing the majority of childcare with schools still closed due to the pandemic. “The work is available in faraway factories but I can’t go as there is no one at home to take care of my children,” said Chineya Devi, 32, who lost her job in an Okhla packaging firm earlier this year.

Many of the women Reuters spoke to stressed the damage from job loss to their self-esteem, leading to mental and physical health issues. “Our men at home or government officials could never understand the impact of job losses on women,” said Ritu Gupta, who owns a playschool in Najafgarh, on the outskirts of New Delhi, that has been closed for over a year.

“I am feeling worthless sitting idle at home. This is not just a monetary loss but the whole meaning of my life.”

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