

PRESS NOTE

Lack Of Work, Decreased Earnings And High Indebtedness Increases Vulnerabilities Of Hidden Women Home-Based Workers: New Research By HomeNet South Asia

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A 2021 study funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and led by HomeNet South Asia – a regional network of home-based worker organisations – has revealed that over 67 million home-based workers in South Asia continue to face grave vulnerabilities in the aftermath of COVID-19.

In 2021, HomeNet South Asia (HNSA) carried out the second round of its 'Impact of COVID-19 on Women Home-Based Workers (HBWs) in South Asia' study. 444 women home-based workers affiliated to 13 member organisations from 12 locations in seven South Asian countries were covered in this study. The report will be published in January 2022.

The soon-to-be published study unpacks the various ways in which women home-based workers are coping with the protracted crisis, and addresses different strategies to tackle the related issues better in the future. It points out that despite the sense of relief and hopefulness that prevailed among the workers as assessed in [the first round](#) of this study in August 2020, the situation has worsened. The study thereby, puts forth actionable recommendations to combat this crisis.

Most significantly, work and income recovery reversed for vulnerable home-based workers in the region. In none of the study locations respondents' earnings were more than or even equal to the pre- COVID 19 crisis levels. For over 81 percent respondents weekly household income reduced in July-August 2021 in comparison to February 2020.

There was a drop in earnings from August 2020 in Colombo, Kandy, Karachi, Kathmandu, Mumbai and Tirupur. On the other hand, out of the 6 cities where earnings increased since last year, in Dhaka, Phulia and Ahmedabad they were still less than two-thirds of the pre-crisis level.

The study reveals that global and local supply chains -including those linked to the garment industry that generate work for a substantial number of home-based workers in the region- still remain disrupted and the demand for products has not bounced back.

It has been observed that limited government relief and rising prices of essentials have resulted in depletion of assets and soaring debts for women home-based workers. The

average unpaid debt is between 50% and 90% of the estimated annual income for 5 locations. In 10 locations, food was the top reason for borrowing money.

“While home-based workers have received little to no support from governments and employers in combating the continued fallout of the COVID-19 crisis, it is their representative organisations that have worked tirelessly to ensure they stay afloat,” points out Navya D’Souza, Regional Coordinator – HomeNet South Asia.

Through 2021, home-based worker organisations, despite being stretched for resources themselves, have kept up their efforts to link vulnerable women home-based workers to relief programmes and to work opportunities. They are also continuously advocating for the recognition of women home-based workers in key government initiatives especially those linked with social protection.

The HNSA-study puts forth a range of recommendations, especially urging for:

- Identification and registration of home-based workers as vulnerable in national social registers for relief assistance.
- Reprioritisation of business support services like upskilling, reskilling, etc.
- Provision of interest-free loans, and easily accessible working capital to women HBWs and their home-based work enterprises, producer companies and cooperatives.
- Development of supportive laws and policies for cooperatives and HBW producer companies.
- Setting up of an emergency response mechanism under the national disaster management system mechanisms for immediate needs like food, cash, or health support, etc.
- Development of social protection systems specific to home-based workers.
- Collaboration with organisations/networks of home-based workers in designing and implementing home-based worker-friendly policies and systems, and in delivery of relief mechanisms.