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## **PANDEMIC STUDIES UNIT**

**POLICIES TO SUPPORT WOMEN DURING THE PANDEMIC:  
LESSONS FROM THE KERALA EXPERIENCE**



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## POLICY BRIEF

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### POLICIES TO SUPPORT WOMEN DURING THE PANDEMIC: LESSONS FROM THE KERALA EXPERIENCE

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## INTRODUCTION

Kerala's management of the Covid-19 pandemic both on the health and economic fronts has been acknowledged world-wide. It has already become a "model" in the way it contained the COVID-19 health crisis, detected initially in this state in end January 2020. From being the top ranked state in daily positive reported Covid-19 cases, it very soon became the least affected of states in India. Things changed around May 2020 when under the many 'unlock' phases, large numbers of Malayalis from outside the country and different states of India returned home. As a consequence, the numbers of the affected increased. Nevertheless, the resilience of the public health system, reflected in detailed multi-level planning on managing the increased numbers, has kept the situation under control. The mortality rate continues to be low.

A key issue to contextualise Kerala's fight against disasters and understand how the state responds so effectively is its historical legacy of public action. This has ensured an improvement in people's well-being as well as the transformation of social, political, and cultural conditions, even at relatively low levels of income. This is what Amartya Sen has described as Public Action, both from below and above. The state's first and immediate reaction to a crisis, whether it was the floods in 2018 and 2019, or now the pandemic, is determined by how it affects people, and what can be done to ameliorate the situation for the people. The whole state machinery gets into action, including all departments and the Planning Board. The people in turn demand to be looked after and taken care of. Hence the response of the government and the response from civil society come together in a crisis. This was seen both during the floods and pandemic.

The huge community mobilisation which occurred during the lockdown period and played a critical role in the containment, tracking and monitoring of the health crisis, is a fallout of this legacy. The frontline health workers were primarily women, with nurses (8000), junior public health nurses (over 5000), ASHA workers (26,475), Anganwadi workers (66,000) together comprising the new volunteer force that was created. There are almost 3.25 lakh registered youth voluntary brigade members, of whom 75,000 are young women. There are 1200 local bodies comprising Gram Panchayats, Block Panchayats, District Panchayats, Municipalities and Corporations. Together they comprise 21,900

wards. Women representatives constitute 11,826 or 54 per cent of the total number of representatives of these bodies. This tells us the available human resources needed to meet a ward's requirement. Supporting and strengthening the Covid-19 containment procedures, and maintaining necessary discipline was a large police force of almost 30,000, of whom about 5000 are women.

## *POLICY RESPONSE TO COVID-19 AND SUPPORT TO WOMEN*

### *Income Support*

Given such a legacy, and aware of the impact of restricted movement and interaction on social and economic life, the Government of Kerala on March 18 (indeed much before the country went into lockdown) announced a package of Rs. 20,000 crore. It was the first state to announce a relief and recovery package amounting to almost two percent of the State Gross Domestic Product. The package contained women-specific programmes, given that women are sometimes the sole earners in a family. Priority was given to putting money into the hands of the people. A major concern of the state government in the initial period was to frontload expenditures that were deemed necessary for the most vulnerable, including women. Pensions for two months were distributed in advance in April, for which the state earmarked Rs 1,320 crore. There are almost 46.85 lakh pensioners in the state, the largest of them (24.10 lakh) being old-age pensions, and within which the largest number are women. Further, pensions were distributed to widows (13.36 lakh), unmarried women of age 50 and above (84,000), the disabled (4.0 lakh), and agricultural labourers (4.56 lakh, of whom 66 percent are women). The pension per month was Rs 1,300 that has now been increased to Rs 1,400. An amount of Rs. 100 crore was set apart to provide assistance of Rs.1000 each for families that were not eligible for welfare pensions.

A major impact of Covid-19 has been the loss of incomes and employment. This is all the more impactful for women given their larger presence at the bottom of the informal sector pyramid. They are often not even remunerated as workers. With sectors like construction, manufacturing, trade, transport, hotel, restaurants and tourism almost completely locked down, the government through this package offered loans worth Rs 2,000 crore through the Kudumbashree Mission to affected

families, with the interest being met entirely by the government through what was called the Chief Minister's Helping Hand Scheme.

Under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA), another Rs 2,000 crore was disbursed in April-May. With 90 per cent of its workforce women, the NREGA gave employment to almost 14.9 lakh women workers in 2019-20 out of the total of 16.54 lakh individuals employed. Both these programmes are extremely beneficial to women in terms of employment and empowerment. There are close to 28,000 micro-enterprises under Kudumbashree, each employing on average about 4 workers. It is well known that over 90 percent of workers employed in traditional sectors in Kerala like coir, cashew, handlooms and khadi are women working on a piece-rate basis. With the lockdown, production completely stopped, resulting in a loss of employment and daily wages. For these sectors, the Welfare Fund Boards announced a relief of Rs.1000 on average per worker, primarily for those registered with it. Later however, it was announced that all BPL families irrespective of registration in the Board would be given Rs.1000. This was very important for those women in informal employment who may not have been registered with a Welfare Board. Such workers include those engaged in domestic work, petty trade and services, and home-based manufacture (independent or part of a supply chain). They needed the government's consideration, and received it.

Women not only lost jobs during the lockdown, work at home intensified, as children remained at home due to the closure from March 2020 of educational institutions, right from anganawadi/pre-schools to regular schools and places of higher education. So much is demanded from the woman if she is seen to be in the house all day. This was observed during the floods, and also during the pandemic. Women had to combine the extra demands of the home with enhanced duties outside as field-level workers helping out in the fight against COVID-19.

#### *Food Assistance*

A second major support to women by the state was in the provisioning of food to households, a major responsibility that women normally shoulder. This came as a big relief to them in the midst of the intensification of their household work. Foodgrains worth Rs 100 crore were distributed to

families through the Public Distribution System (PDS). Another Rs 50 crore was utilised to provide meals at just Rs. 20, as part of the Hunger Free Kerala programme. The setting up of community kitchens through Kudumbashree in convergence with local bodies to ensure that nobody went hungry started functioning in all 941 grama panchayats, and 93 urban local bodies. This also helped in creating employment for Kudumbashree women who were facing difficulties with the closure of micro- enterprises.

### *Support to Children*

Reaching essentials to people when mobility is curtailed can be an important lesson to learn. In terms of food for children and pregnant/lactating women, this was of tremendous help. On 10<sup>th</sup> March 2020, well before the total lockdown, the Women and Child Development Department took an innovative step to ensure nutrition to children, a day after the decision on closing pre-schools and schools from the anganawadi level to Class 7 was taken. It undertook to reach food materials to the homes of all children registered with the anganawadi centres (AWCs), aged 3-6 years and numbering 3.64 lakh in the 33114 functional AWCs. The scheme also covered children between six months to three years, along with pregnant and lactating mothers.

To conclude, the fact that food was made available during these months to households, and separately for children, played a critical role in ensuring food security. It must have also helped to reduce tensions on account of financial difficulties that in my view played a mitigating role against gender-based violence.

### *POLICY RESPONSE TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE*


The second impact which has been much talked about is in terms of violence against women- especially in the current context since those men who have been abusive or are likely to be abusive, are now locked in. One did not hear about it much in the time of the floods, besides instances of voyeurism in the camps. However, a quick study by KILA reported in the press on 4th May yields interesting results; reporting of domestic violence is less but the authors admit that the number of unreported cases could be higher than reported due to inability of women to step out, presence of

abuser in the house and no alternative in the pandemic period etc. The report also points out that in some cases, lockdown has opened up avenue for families to spend more time together, sharing domestic chores and for a better environment. However, in poorer families due to financial insecurity, tensions will run high.

To counter violence against women and children, one major step taken by the government was declaring the setting up of fast track and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) courts across the state to handle any crimes against women and children, during the lockdown period. To ensure women's safety in these unusual circumstances, the Women and Child Development Department created a WCD call centre on WhatsApp which works 24\*7, [+91 94000 80292](tel:+919400080292) to which any abuse or violence against women and children can be intimated; 51 percent of the calls they received between April 11-30<sup>th</sup> were regarding domestic violence. One can say tentatively that the type of high incidence of domestic violence being reported in many states and countries, does not appear to be in such proportion here but more household level data are needed (which are being collected) to understand the nature and incidence of domestic violence. However, that cyber crimes against women have grown is definitely shown by the Crime Records data. The Government response has been in terms of two more Cyberdomes set up in Ernakulam and Kozhikode besides the one functioning in Trivandrum, using innovative technology to catch the perpetrators. However, much greater thought has to be given to this, perhaps a policy on checking such crimes or a specific Act, though enough Sections do exist in current IPC and IT Acts and do we need one more Act?

#### *LESSONS TO BE LEARNT AND CHALLENGES*

(a) The importance of being able to mobilise human resources of a magnitude which ensured a reasonably well functioning home quarantine, relieving the pressure on the health system. Rapid resource teams, consisting of 2-3 members largely women- Anganawadi, ASHA or Kudumbashree workers- or police/trained volunteers, who could be male or female, had been formed to visit homes and monitor home quarantine.




(b) Need for proper planning. In fact, with respect to health management it was ex-ante planning, preparing for the pandemic even before the first case was detected. Kerala is the only state continuing with Five Year plans in a vibrant decentralized planning system. This has enabled Kerala to come up with comprehensive production/employment plans in agriculture and related activities, and in the industrial/service sector for the post-Covid 19 period. This has involved coordination between a number of departments, including and importantly the Local Self Government Department (LSGD). With growth in demand for health and non-health related activities in which Kerala has an advantage, improved employment would be generated for women too.

(c) The policy response in terms of emphasising women's employment, seen during, for example the 2018, 2019 floods, yielded positive outcomes in Kerala in terms of an increase in female work force participation. The rate went up from 16.4 percent to 20.4 percent between PLFS 2017-18 and PLFS 2018-19. However, this rate is still very low. We also do not know whether that rate would have fallen between 2019-20 and 2020-21, the period of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The anxiety of the government to create employment immediately -- through the NREGA or Kudumbashree -- for women who are at the bottom of the labour hierarchy, owing to the fact that they are sometimes the sole earners in a family, is understandable and well appreciated. However, this does in a way add to the intensification of women's work. This is a paradox and a challenge, especially so during an economic or health crisis, like the Covid-19 pandemic. In long-term policy, however, it must be attended to, and could be addressed for example by creating an enabling environment for women to work outside the home by reducing their unpaid household and care work. Long term policy must ensure decent employment for women in the years ahead--incentivising employers who employ women, reserving spaces for women run enterprises and Start ups in industrial parks, greater support other than credit to micro enterprises, consciously giving opportunities to women in the new employment to be generated through the large agricultural and industrial plans drawn up by the government.

(d) There has to be a greater emphasis by the state in enhancing the provision of child/elderly/sick care, and bringing about a more democratic family set up with men sharing household and care





work through a sustained campaign to build a gender conscious society. Let me conclude by highlighting a statement of the Chief Minister in his press conference on March 31<sup>st</sup> 2020. He said that that household work is not meant to be done by women alone. Men too should take it up. It was important that at a time when families were locked in, the emphasis was on a more democratic household set-up.