

Policy Brief Series Five

"Socio economic Impact of COVID-19 on Women and Marginalized community working in the entertainment sector (Intersectionality and different forms of discrimination, exploitation)"

Context:

COVID-19 pandemic has impacted socially and economically in every walk and sectors of humanity, especially women have been impacted differently. In Nepal, 90.5 per cent of women in employment are in informal sectors, according to National Labour Force Survey 2017/18. Within households too, women bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work, which includes caring for children, the elderly and sick family members. Women are mostly engaged in the entertainment sector (massage parlors, spa, dance bars, dohori sajh (folk singing) restaurants and cabin restaurants) and domestic work helper. During COVID-19 pandemic, the informal sector is hugely affected deteriorating the livelihood options of the women. Many women lost their jobs, not getting full salaries and are facing psychological stress due to economic down. At the same time government has given least attention in creating opportunities for them during COVID-19 and now in economic recovery phase.

Women engaged in informal employment have made good contribution in national economy as well, however their challenges during humanitarian context are often overlooked by the government. In Nepal, entertainment sectors is not considered as recognized as dignified profession by the society. They are not safely regulated and protected by the policies. Nepal Government safety and security measures has not yet reached to the women of informal sector. Policy makers have started drawing their attentions and different measures have been taken though in response to the advocacy of the stakeholders working in these sectors and delegation of employer and employee of informal sector. Government has also not set concrete strategy for minimizing the issues faced by women working in informal sector.

Key Issues of women in informal economy (entertainment sector and domestic works):

Employment security challenge: Women of informal sector are a kind of daily wages workers as a domestic helper. In entertainment sector, they work without job agreement and hence they are vulnerable to get rid of job any time. They are not provided with contracts and other facilities based on the Labour Act and Regulation. They do not have insurance policies, salary range value based on their working hour and experience. Most of women working in entertainment sector have to retire on very early age in comparison to the women of formal employment. Once they start getting older, they have to quit their job or they are fired because the job exists until they have beauty and body attraction.

Policy implementation challenge: Based on the study, approximately 70% of the people in Nepal are in informal economy. The informal sectors are mostly not regulated with the organization policies. The employees are mostly not covered with the basic rights to be received from the employer such as insurance, code of conduct, job contract, allowances and salary scale based on the experiences. Mostly, the informal sectors such as restaurants, dance bars, massage parlors do not have practice to provide the job letter, insurance including other facilities. They are getting

least facilities for leave and holidays. Most of the sectors are not covered under labour act hence no regulatory mechanism to support them. Most are compelled to work on verbal commitments in place of contract. Due to regulatory provision of Covid-19 test to reopen the bars and restaurants, lots of women and girls could not afford the test cost and hence, could not get back to work. Though there are various process and regulatory provisions to complain in case of any misbehave and harassment, but most of them do not know about the provisions as well as they do not have belief in getting the justice for their complaints. They are also not aware on the judicial committee of the municipality, where they can come and ask for the justice. In addition, though policies have provisioned the equal wages for both men and women, but women are almost not getting the wages equal to men.

Harassment and exploitation: Mostly the women and girls working in entertainment sectors, they face harassment and violence from the employer as well as clients. They are compelled to tolerate the sexual harassment and violence because of the fear of job loss. The LGBTQI groups involved in the entertainment sectors face more challenges. Women are also responsible to look after their children, hence they feel more insecure of job loss and tolerate violence and exploitation. Due to this reason, women and girls face psychological problem and the challenge was very prominent during Covid-19. After lock down over, though the entertainment sectors are opening and conducting their business slowly, but they are running with less staffs and most of workers lost their job. Due to business down by Covid-19, they are compelled to work on less money without any facilities. Sometimes, they face violence and exploitation from security personals as well.

Lack of recovery and rehabilitation plan: Women and girls working in this sector were not covered by any recovery and livelihood restoration plan from the government side. Though the informal sectors economy had significant contribution in national economy, but during emergency the employees were not addressed with livelihood restoration programs hence felt difficulties during Covid-19 as they did not have any fringe benefits provision.

Federal Level View: Government has formed monitoring mechanism under leadership of Chief District Officer (CDO) in which organizations working on this area are also members. Due to extreme pressure generated from the entertainment sector, the administration allowed to reopen the sectors with safety and security protocol but the employers mostly do not follow the protocols. Security forces have been inducted to show sensitive behaviors to them.

Civil society organization have conducted joint monitoring visits too however the issues remains the same because ultimately they have to follow what employer offer because government does not have any sort of support for them if in case they lose job. Series of talks has taken place with owners, and with request to follow protocol and social distancing, not to discriminate wages.

Practice of Budhanilkantha Municipality, Bagmati Province: Collected data of such workers, distributed reliefs to them and tried best to reach them with their identity. The municipality is also conducting discussion on how to reach them in post Covid-19. They are exploring alternative skill training for them and allocated budget so that they do not have to be independent during this kind of context. Municipality is also preparing their data base to have their detail information. The

municipality is coordinating with concerned organization and stakeholders working in this sector for their rights fulfillment.

Civil Society Views:

(Mahila Ekata Samaj, WOFON and Biswas Nepal): Local Government should make rules and explore strategies to include this sector as reputed and recognized work. During emergencies like Covid-19, the labor desk should be installed at community level, where they can come and share their problems and any sort of exploitation to them. There is need of policy to cover the work safety of these sector as formal work and also both employers and employees need awareness on the safety and security of the workers. The disaster risk management unit of palika should have the data and information on the women and girls who are working in the informal sectors so that during any emergency, they can be rescued and supported with the recovery and rehabilitation programs. WOFON has conducted survey during lockdown with 700 women and found similar cases of livelihood challenges, feeding children meeting their demands and more violence once husbands are at home. Women and girls face other social stigma because the profession is not considered as the recognized and dignified profession. Mostly, there are middle person who are involved to provide jobs hence, most of the income also taken by them.

Policy Recommendations:

- The informal and entertainment sectors should be regulated by the policy provisions such as Labor Act. There must be policies to ensure the job safety and security of the employees of the informal sectors.
- During the pandemic, the strong safety protocols should be developed and implemented in the restaurants, bars and other entertainment institutions for the health safety of women and girls working there because, they are also engaged with children and other family members when back home.
- The local level should have the database system of their citizen, who are involved in the informal economy to ensure that they are provided with relief materials and also to cover with the livelihood restoration and recovery programs during pandemics.
- The judicial committee of local level must have the provision of the complaint mechanism, where women and girls from informal economy can complaint in case of any violence and harassment.
- The local administration must ensure the safety of the women and girls in entertainment sectors with regular monitoring and interactions with them. Administration must have the mechanism of anonymous complaints and must respond to the complaints.
- The women and girls must be oriented on the complaint mechanisms at local administration and local level and must ensure that their voices are heard and responded.

This policy brief is prepared based on the dialogue “Impact of Covid-19 on Informal Sector” conducted on 17th January 2021 with the local administration (CDO-Kathmandu), Tokha Municipality and organizations working for the women of entertainment sectors.

