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**Understanding the agency of female migrant workers in
the time of COVID-19
The case of Tirupur garment cluster**

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List of Acronyms

ESI	Employees State Insurance
ILO	International Labour Organization
PDS	Public Distribution System
PF	Provident Fund
PMGKY	Prime Minister Gareeb Kalyan Yojana
PMGKRA	Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Rozgar Abhiyaan
PMJDY	Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana

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Abstract

COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on the life and livelihood of migrant workers in the garment sector. It has deepened the pre-existing inequalities, laying bare the precarity of social, political and economic systems. Women, more specifically migrant women, have been disproportionately impacted by the crisis. Therefore, examining how the ongoing crisis of COVID-19 has affected female migrant garment workers in Tirupur export-garment cluster and how migrant women have attempted to respond to the crisis will be key areas of focus.

On applying an analytical framework of intersectionality and agency, it showed that COVID-19 was not gender neutral but rather had exacerbated female migrant workers' highly vulnerable and precarious position in the labour hierarchy. Migrant women faced increased threat to their safety and health which was further heavily influenced by the intersections of gender, age, socio-economic condition, and marital status, affecting some more than others. Though influenced by this environment of crisis and inequality, many migrant women were active agents of change expressing their agency through practices of resilience, followed by reworking in order to cope and even improve their material well-being in the workspace. The shift from resilience to reworking was also influenced by the duration of the crisis.

Relevance to Development Studies

Gender is a central tenant for most policies and programmes globally, however despite this focus, achieving gender equality appears to still a long way off. In times of crisis, impact on women is far more severe, especially for women from already marginalised and vulnerable communities. Hence, in order for policy makers and development practitioners to understand what these women need, it is important to understand their access to social and material resources and their positionality within context. This research offers us a way to examine how the decisions made by women workers in times of crisis are influenced and shaped by their relationship with the local labour market in terms of who gets what, and how their own socio-economic background, family obligations and immediate circumstances influence these decisions. It is relevant to development studies as it brings to light the need for a more equitable and inclusive society where gender responsive social and economic plans and policies are central.

Keywords

Labour, Garment, Agency, Intersectionality, Gender, Tirupur, COVID-19

Chapter 1 : Introduction

The ongoing, unexpected and unprecedented Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent health policy responses has caused global panic and disruption. The nature of the pandemic has heterogeneous impacts across people, countries and continents. Some industries have been particularly affected, notably India's garment sector which is export-oriented and has suffered from a collapse in demand (Anner 2020). Tirupur, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, is the site of a garments cluster and has experienced considerable hardship as a result of COVID-19 (Singh 2020).

The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing income and social inequalities, further locking garment workers in unacceptably precarious conditions. Female interstate migrant garment workers, who make up a large percentage of the labour composition of the garment cluster in Tirupur are some of the most vulnerable and marginalized within the labour hierarchy. These women are not only subjected to unstable contracts, long working hours and very low wages. As migrants, they also lack the social ties to her social network and familiarity with employment practices in the work state (Asian Floor Wage Alliance 2020). As a result, the precariousness and exploitative conditions of their position at the bottom of the garment supply chain has an adverse effect on their ability to leverage any form of workplace or marketplace bargaining power (Schmalz et al 2018). Consequently, they are especially vulnerable and exposed to exploitative and discriminatory practices. This situation has been accentuated by the failure of India's government to adequately support garment (or other) workers during this crisis (World Bank 2020).

Several studies have shown that the COVID-19 crisis is not gender neutral, but rather has exacerbated female migrant workers highly vulnerable and precarious position in the labour hierarchy (World Bank 2020). Overarchingly, there are two key categories through which the effects of COVID-19 on female migrant workers can be identified. The first relates to the quality of employment, which is defined from the perspective of the individual. If certain conditions such as safety and health at work or remuneration is favourable or social security of workers are met, then the quality of employment is high (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe 2015). The second category, household dynamics, consists of social relations and reproductive responsibilities within the household (Carswell and De Neve 2013).

The aim of my research is two-fold. First, I seek to assess the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experiences of female migrant workers in Tirupur. I will take the lens of household dynamics in order to analyse the broader socio-economic environment within which migrant women are currently living and how they have been affected by the crisis. Secondly, I seek to examine how migrant women have attempted to respond to the crisis in the workspace, where I will focus on the quality of employment.

These questions are studied against a backdrop of two key periods: lockdown (24th March to 31st May 2020) and post-lockdown (1st June to 31st August 2020). Comparing across these two periods facilitates analysis of how migrant women coped within rapidly changing social, economic and political environment. The lockdown phase will enable a sound understanding of the immediate impact of the crisis in terms of quarantine measures and restrictions of movement on migrant women, and the post-lockdown phase will show their progression when restrictions eased.

In this research, I draw on the concepts of agency and intersectionality to create a framework to demonstrate how agency is composed of individual actions that can have diverse manifestations in quality of employment. This is because female migrant workers are

embedded in broader (intersectional) social and community relations which are both unequal and asymmetrical (Carswell and De Neve 2013). This research will add to the existing literature of impacts, and coping mechanisms, of female migrant workers during times of crisis. It will also shed light on how social relations, family obligations and immediate circumstances influence the decisions made by women in spaces of employment.

My research paper is structured as follows. In the next three chapters, I will introduce the research context of the export-oriented garment cluster and the role of female interstate migrant labour within that. I introduce COVID-19 in this context. In chapter 3, I will introduce my conceptual framework which engages with the concepts of agency and intersectionality. In chapter 4, I outline my research methods, which involve analysing both primary and secondary data include interviews with female migrant workers and other elite interviews. Chapter 5 answers my first research sub-question on the effects of COVID-19 on experiences of female migrant workers in Tirupur according to the category of household dynamics. In Chapter 6, I answer the second and third research sub-question, that unpacks responses to COVID-19 by female migrant workers in terms of quality of employment, both during and post-lockdown. This chapter also examines the responses during the phases to see if agency led to a better, worse or neutral relative change. Chapter 7, the conclusion, explains the implications of the research in understanding women's position in times of crisis and explores how everyday actions of individual micro agency differ depending on the employment relations and existing social and material resources accessible to female migrant workers.

Chapter 2 : The Context

In this chapter I will begin by introducing the garment sector in India, its evolution, the way it is structured and the composition of the labour force with special focus on the status of women in the garment sector. Following this, I will explore the garment cluster of Tirupur, and the important role played by female migrant workers within the cluster. My research will focus specifically on interstate migrant workers only. Finally, I will discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic has generally affected the functioning on the Tirupur cluster.

2.1 Garment sector In India

India occupies an important position in the global garments industry and was ranked as the 5th largest exporter of garments in the world in 2019 (Statista 2019). The industry is also one of the biggest employers, employing over 45 million people directly and many more million people indirectly (Sankarakarthykeyan et al 2019, IBEF 2020). India has a multi-tiered garment production process with the first tier consisting of garment export units. Much of country's garments production hubs are in clusters and are often small-medium scale. This was the result of decentralization and segmentation of the production process. Simultaneously, in an effort to remain competitive, the export-oriented part of the industry saw a move towards increasing flexibilisation of the workforce (International Labour Organisation 2017). A main feature of flexibilization has been the feminization of the labour force, which refers to the increase in the labour force participation of women alongside the relative reduction in employment of men (Standing 1999). This was coupled with a rise of temporary or contract workers in the formal/organized sector, as well as an expanding unorganised/informal sector. This trend can be linked to the deterioration of working conditions over time and a significant part of the 'race to the bottom' resulting from global competition (Veeramani 2017, Sankarakarthykeyan et al 2019).

This trend also had serious implications on the labour intensive garment supply chain leading to preference by employers for a more flexible contract based labour composition such as casual or contract¹ workers in the formal sector. Furthermore, these conditions also led to limited social security provisions and further reduction in wages. This highly decentralized and segmented form of production also come at a cost towards unionization (International Labour Organisation 2017, Mezzadri and Srivstava 2015).

Despite India being a signatory of international conventions, as well as creator and executor of national laws in favour of protecting and ensuring basic human rights and decent work standards. Figure 2.1 below is a short list of the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions ratified by India, the national laws in support as well as the status of implementation or lack thereof.

Figure 2.1
ILO conventions ratified by India and their status

¹ A contract worker usually refers to a worker employed by a third-party contractor, who is different from the principal employer (International Labour Organisation 2017)

Area	International conventions/ Ratification	National Law(s)	Status of Implementation
Forced labour	ILO 29: Forced Labour Convention ILO 105: Abolition of forced labour convention	The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act (1976)	The ILO conventions apply to all workers in the formal or informal sector In India, more than bonded labour, 'disguised' forms of forced labour such as compulsory overtime is a bigger matter of concern. An example where such an issue is present is in the Sumangali System in Tamil Nadu
Discrimination	ILO 100: Equal remuneration convention ILO 111: Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention	Indian constitution: Art. 15 -No discrimination on basis of caste or gender. Equal remuneration Act 1976 Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (prevention, prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013.	Discrimination, especially gender-based discrimination exists in matters pertaining to wages such as gender wage gap, lower wages given to migrant workers compared to local workers. It also exists in other forms such as insecure jobs, no social security or maternity benefits, sexual harassment etc
Freedom of Association/ Collective Bargaining	No convention signed for this i.e 87 (The Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention) or 98 (Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention)	Constitution Art 19(1) (c) – right to form association and unions or cooperative societies. Trade Unions Act 1926 Industrial Disputes Act 1947	Unionisation is difficult in India due to the nature of the segmented supply chain and has proven to be even more difficult to execute in the informal sector. Among the states, Tamil Nadu has the strongest union via a tripartite agreement.
Living Wage i.e a wage that is high enough to maintain a normal standard of living.	ILO 26: Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery Convention	Minimum Wage Act (1948)	There is a national floor wage, and states set the various minimum wages, but this is not always implemented. Even where the minimum wage is being paid, it is not close to the estimates of a living wage. Among the workers, female migrant workers are paid the least.
Reasonable Working Hours	ILO 1: Hours of work (industry) convention	Factories Act (1948) (establishes 8 hour day, 48 hour week)	Difficult to enforce with little state oversight.
Safe Working Conditions	No convention signed. i.e ILO 155- Occupational safety and health convention	Factories Act (1948) Maternity Benefit Act (1961)	Implemented but with limitations i.e lack of creches, canteens, proper toilets etc.

Source: Modified from Kane (2015), *Ratifications for India* (n.d)

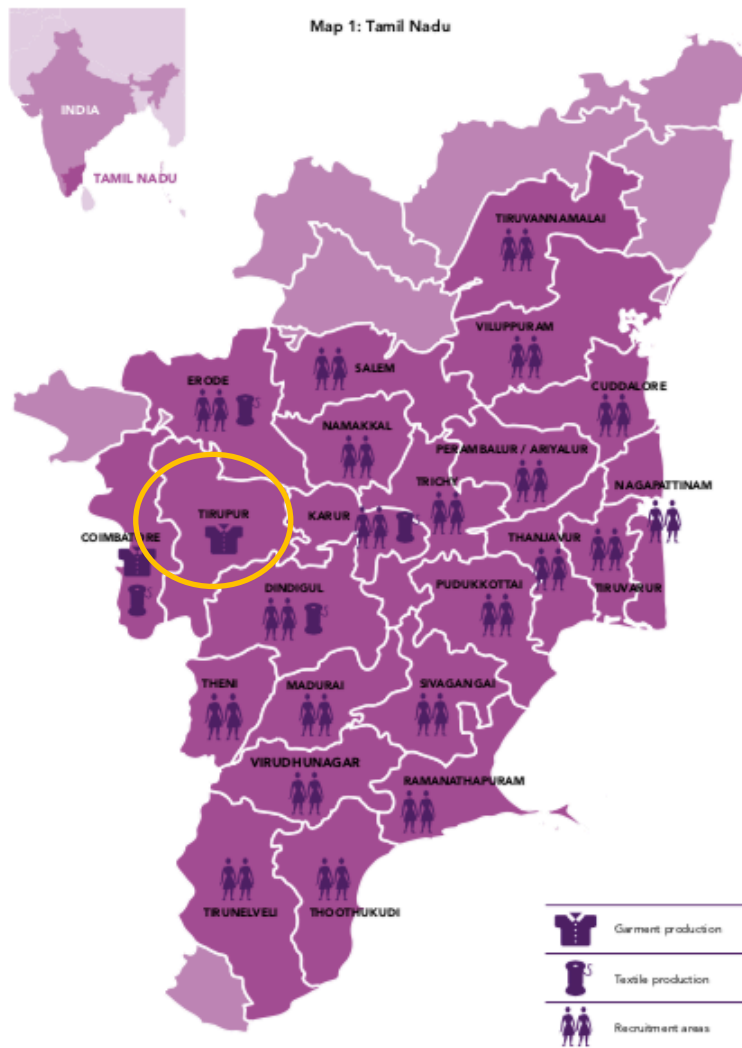
2.2 Status of women in the garment sector

The rise of the export-oriented garment industry in India was accompanied by a feminisation of the workforce where gender norms continue to determine the position of a worker in the labour market (Elson 1981). Research has shown that women are subject to longer hours of work, lower wages, precarious working conditions, and verbal and sexual harassment (Dasgupta 2019, Delahanty 1999). Further, employers often discriminate by favouring to hire women workers as they could be replaced/terminated periodically as per changes to their life cycle such as marriage or childbirth (Majumder and Begun 2004). Management practices such as these have made the labour force more 'flexible' and informal, thereby limiting access to benefits such as social security as well as the unfavourable impact of labour regulation and worker unionisation that were part and parcel of the formal sector (Dasgupta 2019, Delahanty 1999).

Feminisation in the country is location specific. For example, in Bangalore, 80 per cent of the workers are women while in NCR, only 30 per cent are women. Furthermore, the position occupied by female workers in the labour hierarchy is also dependent on the existing social structures of class, migrant status, caste etc. For example, migrant workers are considered more hardworking and willing to work for less money and hence are preferred by factories (Dasgupta 2019, Mezzadri and Srivstava 2015).

2.3 The Tirupur garment cluster

Map 2.1
Map of garment production



Source: SOMO 2011

Tirupur in Tamil Nadu has been the centre of textile business since 1870s (Devaraja 2011). Today it is one of the important garment clusters industrial cluster in India and one of the largest -t-shirts, hosiery and knitwear garment manufacturing and exporting clusters in South Asia (International Labour Organisation 2017). The cluster is one of India's highest foreign exchange earners, reaching garment export value of INR26,000 crore or USD3.5 billion in

2019 (Ravichandran 2019). The cluster also employs over 3.5 lakh workers (Kalita 2019). Currently, the cluster exports for leading global brands such as Walmart, H&M, Carrefour, C&A, Tommy Hilfiger and Marks & Spencer (Mookerji 2013).

Majority of the workers in both types of manufacturing units work on a shift basis. The average number of shifts in a working day is one and a half i.e 8 hours+ 4 hours referred to as a 'shift and a half' (Kalita 2019).

As a site of flexible specialization, Tirupur's extensive production network and its position as a leading garment exporter has put contradictory pressure on the suppliers in the cluster to meet the stringent quality checks and standards set by brands for the global market, while at the same time facing the need to remain competitive by reducing cost and improve 'just in time' production (UK Aid 2020, De Neve 2012). This is usually achieved by the highly feminized and flexible labour force employed in the sector.

2.4 Female migrant workers in Tirupur

A key feature attributed to Tirupur's flexible production system is the lower share of permanent workers and a high influx of migrants, approximately 70 per cent. Some of the workers settled in Tirupur while others remain temporary or circular migrants² (De Neve 2012). These workers migrate from Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Assam, and West Bengal (Inter-state); as well as from other districts within Tamil Nadu (Intra state). Most of these migrant labours live in hostel accommodation on or near the factory premise and depend on the factory for their basic need of food and shelter. (Carswell and De Neve 2014, International Labour Organisation 2017, Mala 2016, SOMO, 2011).

In Tirupur, contract labour³ is the preferred form of recruitment and in the past few years, contract labour, especially of female migrant workers has been increasing (Mezzadri & Srivastava, 2015). Among migrant workers, young unmarried female migrants are preferred over their male counterparts "mainly to exploit the comparative advantages of their disadvantages" (Majumdar and Begum 2004, pp1) such as amenability to work long hours for lower pay, usually far below living wage, in poor working condition, low bargaining power, passivity and loyalty (SOMO 2011). Most of these women tend to have no prior work experience and hence rely on contactors and employers, which can leave them in a vulnerable position. The lack of prior experience also means that they are unlikely to be familiar with collectivism and are more likely to find the hierarchical work cultures of male-dominated society reproduced in spaces of production and employment (Interview NGO1, Majumdar and Begum 2004, Jenkins 2013, De Neve 2012).

A major contributor to their willingness to work long hours for little pay stems from their impoverished background which drives the need to migrate in order to find viable livelihood opportunities. However, on migrating, workers tend to face other challenges such as lack of familiarity with the area, being cut off from their social networks, language barriers, and most importantly the heavy reliance on contractors which further compounds their already vulnerable position in the labour market and leaves them open to be exploited by employers. Female migrants are particularly vulnerable as they may feel even more dependent on contractor for safety and protection, thereby leaving them exposed to forms of abuse and exploitation (ActionAid India 2020, Maher, 2009, International Labour

² Return to their home destination once or twice a year

³ Contract labour (i.e. the employment of workers through third-party labour suppliers, rather than directly by the factory)

Organisation 2017). Some of the problems reported by migrants are not limited to their low wage but are also related to the lack of basic social security entitlements, written contracts, low vertical mobility and overall general precariousness of work (International Labour Organisation 2017).

Figure 2.2 below provides a snapshot of the general working conditions faced by female migrant workers in the garments sector in Tirupur. It discusses the indicators related to quality of employment as well as those connected to household dynamics.

Figure 2.2

Snapshot of the general working conditions faced by female migrant workers

Quality of employment and productive capacity	
Nature of employment contract	Female migrant workers fall in the precarious employment categories i.e short-term nature of the employment contracts, usually unstable and with the possibility of being terminated on short notice
Hiring and Recruitment	The recruitment process is largely informal (via contractors) due to the highly seasonal nature of the industry. Female migrants are often relegated to lower skilled jobs within the labour hierarchy. Since contractors are a part of a more informal recruitment process, they are poorly monitored and hence have no obligation to ensure labour laws are implemented for the benefit of the workers making it easier for the contractor to dispose of them when the need arises. Over the years, the increased fragmentation of the supply chain has increased the demand for contract labour.
Working hours and overtime	Most female migrant workers are considered more 'productive' and 'docile' by employers and thus are employed for longer hours and overtime. In Tirupur, workers do a shift and a half per day on average i.e 12 hour shifts which is far more than the ILO mandated working time, as well as what is allowed by the Factories Act of 1948. Excessive overtime above and beyond the 12 hours has also become normalized in the garment industry.
Wage level	Amongst the top garment exporting countries in the world, the Indian garment industry has one of the lowest minimum wages. According to AFWA, garment workers in India get between INR 9,000 to 12,000 (USD 133 to 160 per month), while the living wage stood at INR 29,323 per month (USD 386). This forces many migrant workers to work overtime. However, under the law, overtime must be paid at double the standards wage, but it is rarely done so. For overtime, many migrant women get paid equal or even lower than their regular wage which puts added financial strain on them. However, working overtime is essential for many migrant workers as they need to send money home.
Safe and secure accommodation	For safety and security purposes, most migrant women workers live in factory owned hostel accommodation. These accommodations are quite cramped with many women having to share a room and toilet. The rest of the migrant labour force are densely packed into slum-like clusters with limited access to water and electricity in order to keep cost of living from exceeding their low wage
Mobility	Many migrant women living in hostels face serious restriction in terms of mobility. Furthermore, when new orders come into factories women have no choice but to go into work and are transported under the watchful eye of supervisory members of the factory, irrespective of time of day.
Access to safe work environment (provided by employers, if any)	While garment factories are no longer part of the hazardous list in the factories act, that does not mean they are without danger. Lack of proper ventilation, disposal of wastes, presence of fumes/dust, and even overcrowding results adversely impacting the work safety. Some hazards include accidents related to puncture wounds from needles, excessive heat and noise, respiratory illnesses from inhaling cotton dust and even allergies such as from dyes, etc. Further, poor posture and leads to ergonomic hazards. Female workers also face abuse- verbal, physical and sexual harassment in factories and hostels which is often not reported for fear of losing their job. Migrant women are especially vulnerable as they lack any form of support network being away from their home state
Access to health care in the workplace	Under the law, contract workers in the formal sector are eligible for certain social security benefits such as employee insurance under the Employee State Insurance Act (ESI) 1948, for establishments with 10 or more workers. However, this is rarely instituted. Either deductions are not made by the employers or, even if they are made, they are not deposited in the account of the workers. Therefore, benefits such as healthcare and maternity protection tied to ESI are also not accessible to many of the women migrants, leaving them to rely on government-sanctioned free health centers for healthcare. And even if women have access to it, the poor quality of services, under-staffing at ESI dispensaries and hospitals, etc make it difficult to access.
Collective bargaining	The flexible and fragmented nature of the labour force has reduced the importance and made unionization very difficult among migrant women. Further, workers docility, as well as the general barriers of language and culture, both between migrant workers and with local workers leads, to a further hampering the possibility of collective bargaining
Household dynamics	
Access to adequate nutritious food	As a result of low pay, the nutritional status of garment workers is generally quite poor. Furthermore, the need to meet production targets results in many workers either cutting their lunch break short or skipping it altogether. The Public Distribution System (PDS) system meant to ensure access to adequate nutritious food is also faulty as many workers struggle to access it since they are not registered in the work state.
Level of violence against women in the household	Several studies such as by Varatharasan (2012) suggests that domestic violence is present in the lives of Indian female garment workers. The dominant forms of violence include physical domestic violence. However, since domestic violence is seen as a 'private family matter' it largely goes undocumented, and in many ways accepted by women as 'right' of husbands to have power over them.
Access to health care/facilities	Many organizational barriers to access public health centers such as long waiting lists and times before obtaining treatment, highly understaffed and under equipped health centers. Further, financial barriers associated with their low wage makes it difficult for them to access private centers as well. For women there is added barrier of permission which is tied to gendered norms stemming from unequal power relations
Unpaid care work	On average, female garment workers work 9-10 hour shifts, many times for a migrant workers this can go to 12 hours quite easily. Despite that most migrant women who have family obligation are expected to full them such as cook and clean the house, feed and take care the children and elderly family members. Their roles are tied into the gender norms surrounding the woman as a caregiver.

Source: Author's construction based on International Labour Organisation 2017, Majumdar & Begum 2004, Maher 2009, Ruthven 2020, Interview NGO1, Jenkins 2013, Varatharasan, 2012, Cividep 2015

Gender-based discrimination in both employment and household is structural and stems from unequal power relations and manifests itself in various forms, such as difference in wages, limited access to facilities, etc. It is also apparent from the male-dominated management in most factories, that discriminatory modes of recruitment employ young female migrant workers in subordinate and more precarious positions (International Labour Organisation 2017, Elson 1981). The precarious conditions of their position has an adverse effect on their ability to leverage any form of workplace or marketplace bargaining power leaving them increasingly vulnerable and exposed to exploitative and discriminatory practices

(Schmalz et al 2018). The implication of using low-cost female migrant labour to remain competitive, among others, has left the Tirupur garment supply chain exposed and vulnerable to any disruption (Asian Floor Wage Alliance 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic was one such disruption that sent shockwaves through the global clothing supply chain with its effects having far reaching and serious consequences to the cluster. The section below captures how COVID-19 and the ensuing prevention and containment measures adversely impacted the garment supply chain, and more especially how this impact was transferred to the garment workers.

2.5. COVID-19: The pandemic in the garment supply chain

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a direct impact on the global garment supply chain. Its spread to Europe and beyond led to a drop-in consumer demand in the global north, leading many brands to cancel orders or withhold/delay payments for orders already produced (Asian Floor Wage Alliance 2020). Brands refusal to honour the contractual obligation, and in many cases involving ‘force majeure’ created an atmosphere of uncertainty among Indian suppliers. This led to a series of cash/credit crunch, forcing many factories to try to employ coping mechanisms by cutting down costs of production, mainly labour costs and letting workers go. In some cases, factories began to close entirely. This already dire situation was compounded by state sanctioned lockdown measures to curb the spread of the virus which further crippled the world economy (Asian Floor Wage Alliance 2020).

In order to assess the response of workers in a time of COVID-19, I divide my research into two phases - lockdown (24th March to 31st May 2020) and post-lockdown (1st June to 31st August 2020). In the former, I aim to capture the immediate fallout of the containment and prevention measures adopted by the state on migrant women, while in the latter I seek to explore how they have navigated the unlocking process.

Lockdown phase

In the case of India, the lockdown can be categorized into four mini phases. The first began on the 24th March and lasted till the 14th April 2020. This period saw the total shut-down of all factories and production houses in the country on very short notice, including Tirupur, resulting in workers being let go, many without pay. The lockdown also included a complete shutdown of all forms of public transportation in the country (Asian Floor Wage Alliance 2020).

During this period the Government introduced welfare measures such as Prime Minister Gareeb Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY)⁴, an economic stimulus package to alleviating the immediate hardships and tackle difficulties faced by migrant workers during the pandemic and the 21-day nationwide lockdown. The scheme dictated that in addition to free cereals (distributed via the Public Distribution System (PDS), free gas cylinders, and a credit of INR500 per month for three months for female JanDhan account holders⁵, workers under the Employees State Insurance (ESI) fund were also to be paid be approximately 70 percent of salary for the duration of the lockdown. However, those not under ESI (usually informal workers or

⁴ Under the scheme, five kilograms of free wheat/rice was provided to more than 80 crore people - to each member of a family - along with 1 kg free whole chana per family, per month (Times of India 2020)

⁵ Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) is National Mission for Financial Inclusion to ensure access to financial services, namely, a basic savings & deposit accounts, remittance, credit, insurance, pension in an affordable manner (Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (n.d.))

contract workers) had to rely on the generosity of the factory owner/contractor (Fibre2fashion 2020, Fairwear 2020). Furthermore, the state government of Tamil Nadu also encouraged paid leave for all migrant workers in the state as well as issued a statement asking landlords not to demand rent from tenants during the period of the lockdown. However, no punitive action would be taken against those who failed to comply (Garments Mahila Karmikara Munnade 2020, Clean Clothes Campaign 2020).

The second phase consisted of the national lockdown extending to May 3rd (Economic Times 2020). The extension of the lockdown and the continued delay in payment from brands, lack of new orders and the general atmosphere of uncertainty led to many factories in Tirupur closing their doors permanently (Interview NGO2, Khan 2020). The third and fourth phases of the lockdown began from 4th May to 17th May and 18th May to 31st May, respectively, with gradual unlocking (Singh 2020). In Tirupur, from 6th May onwards, approximately about 16 percent of garment manufacturers began production with around 20-25 percent workforce. By this period, the cluster had already lost approximately INR2400 crore of summer exports due to the lockdown. Further, the president of the Textile Association of India, Ashok Juneja stated that the availability of labour was a “big issue” as many workers had gone back/or were in the process of returning to their hometowns during the lockdown (Chaliawala 2020).

In conjunction, after more than a month of migrants struggling to find a way home, the government released an order in May allowing for the movement of stranded migrants, among others, to return back to their hometowns on shramik trains and special buses, though there were many who continued walking as they could not avail the transport on offer for various reasons (Sabat 2020).

Post-lockdown

The period of June to August⁶ heralded the end of the nationwide sanction lockdown phases and a gradual ‘unlocking’ of the state and country began. Compared to May, more factories began operation (approximately 40 percent) with a larger labour force of between 40- 60 percent depending on access to labour. This increase coincided with the introduction of new orders by brands in Tirupur (Interview NGO1,2). In order to supplement the income of the workers, the government also launched the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Rozgar Abhiyaan (PMGKRA), an employment programmes. The programmes have many similar features to MNRGA and is a source of alternative livelihood for workers (ActionAid India 2020, Shanmughasundaram & Selvam 2020).

Overall, the impact of COVID-19 had a significant impact on an already exposed and vulnerable garment cluster of Tirupur. The period of research saw cancellation of old orders, reduction of new orders, and the slowing and closing down (sometimes permanently) of production left employers under immense financial pressure resulting in many migrant workers being left adrift without a job or wages. Without a source of income, the already low paid workers were left with minimal savings and barely any other livelihood alternatives. This dire situation was further compounded by lockdown measures that hampered migrant mobility where on one hand migrant workers were struggling to leave Tirupur and return to their home state but were unable to access or afford public or private transportation. On the other, some migrant workers who returned to their home state in the month’s prior were unable to return to work due to the same reason. This situation severely tested the migrant workers ability to cope in the current environment of rising fear and uncertainty (ActionAid India 2020, Clean Clothes Campaign 2020).

⁶ Considered lean season in the garment production lifecycle

Having introduced the context around the Tirupur garment cluster, the role of female garment workers and the impacts of the pandemic in the supply chain in this chapter, the next proceeds to introduce my conceptual framework.

Chapter 3 : Conceptual Framework

This chapter introduces the conceptual framework which guides this research. Gender and intersectionality serve as tools to explain gendered patterns of work, family, sexuality and authority in labour markets and how interactions of other social categories, such as age, class, and race, result in differences in quality of employment and productive capacity (drawn from the ILO's decent work framework) of women participating in the labour market, and their household dynamics. In this research, I focus on the intersections of gender, socio-economic status, age, and marital status. I further draw on agency through Katz's classification of resilience, reworking and resistance to create a framework to demonstrate how agency is composed of individual actions that can have diverse manifestations in the quality of employment and productive capacity of women, accounting for the embedded broader social and community relations which are both unequal and asymmetrical.

3.1 Intersectionality

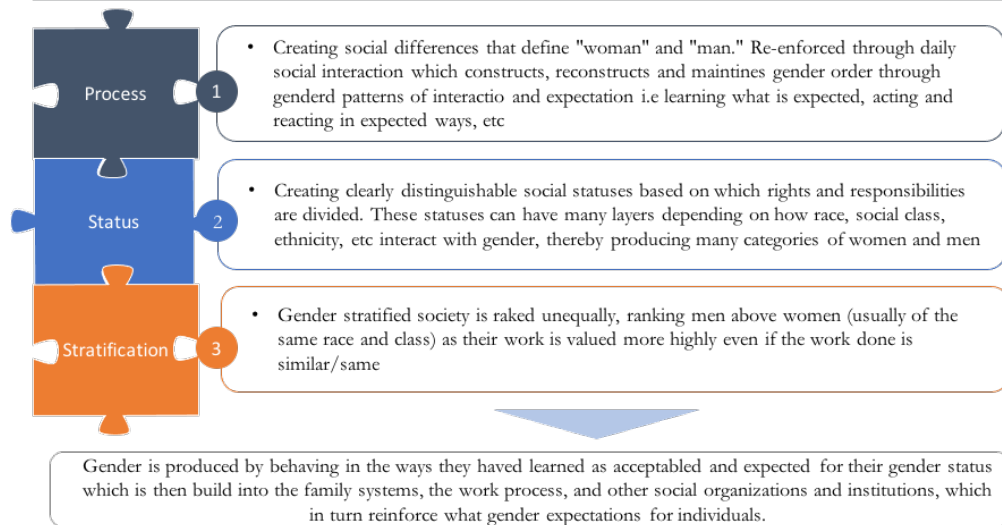
3.1.1 Gender as a social status, process and stratification system

A helpful explanation of gender is provided by Laslett and Brenner (1989) who stated that "gender refers to socially constructed and historically variable relationships, cultural meanings, and identities through which biological sex differences become socially significant" (pp 382). Gender is thus not just an individual characteristic, but a key element of social relations between men and women, based on the perceived differences between them and manifest in personal identities and in social interactions (Laslett and Brenner 1989, Scott 1986). However, gender is not only located in interpersonal relations but as an institution that orders the social process of daily life through the creation of patterns of behavior and expectation for individuals. Through these individual actions and interactions, whether voluntary or forced, the social structures that we refer to as family, government, economy etc are produced and re-produced on a daily basis. Furthermore, through this daily re-production they are strengthened, weakened, undermined or resisted. In other words, we are constantly "*doing gender*" (West and Zimmerman 1987, Lorber 1994).

The concept of gender can help to explain patterns of work, family, sexuality and authority. In relation to family, gender helps understand why occupational gender stratification and segregation occurs. For work, gender can help explain why housework is relegated to women. In the case of sexuality, we can better understand why violence against women occurs. For authority, gender sheds light on why there are so few women in leadership/senior positions, etc (Lorber 1994). Hence, as displayed in the diagram below, gender is a process, a status and a stratification.

Figure 3.1
Gender as a process, status and stratification

"Gender as a process of social construction, a system of social stratification, and an institution that structures every aspect of our lives because of its embeddedness in the family, the workplace, and the state, as well as in sexuality, language, and culture" (Lorber 1994, pp5).



Source: Author's construction from Elson 1981 Lorber 1994

As outlined in the diagram above, gender as a process, status and stratification creates gendered inequalities which are produced and maintained by social processes which are built into individual identities and social structures in a very deliberate manner. Thereby, constructions of women as subordinate to men are created (Elson 1981). The division of labour and occupational segregation found in contemporary society mimics this subordination (Acker 2006, Agarwal 1997).

3.1.2 Separate and unequal: Gendered labour markets

Labour markets are gendered institutions and reinforce gender inequality. Four key dimensions of gendered labour markets have been identified (Torra 2015, Elson 1999):

- Failure to recognize the reproductive economy
- Higher level of informality of female labour
- Occupational segregation by gender
- Unequal/different working condition and remuneration for male and female labour

In the first dimension, the labour market fails to take into account the contribution of the reproductive economy (i.e. unpaid care work usually done by women) in favour of the productive economy (i.e. paid work). This failure to acknowledge the contribution of the reproductive economy equally puts pressure on women to choose (Torra 2015, Elson 1999).

The second dimension represents the division of the productive economy into 'formal' and informal'. The latter is characterised by low job security, limited to no access to social security, lower pay, etc. According to study by the ILO in 2019, in developing countries the percentage of women workers who were informally employed is substantially higher than the percentage of male workers (Bonnet et al 2019, Torra 2015, Elson 1999).

The third dimension of occupational gender segregation results in women's work tending to be lower in pay and prestige compared to that of their male counterparts (Lorber 1994). Hence, the focus of this dimension is not job segregation itself, but the inequality associated with it. For example, female dominated occupations have fewer chances of promotion (Acker 2006, Torra 2015).

The fourth dimension further reinforced the existing gender inequality by penalizing women for the time spent engaged in the reproductive economy as it means that fewer hours are spent in the productive economy. This is viewed by employers as a lack of commitment, thereby reproducing the failure to acknowledge the reproductive economy (first dimension). Furthermore, even when involved in the same job as their male counterpart, women are treated as subordinate and hence paid at a lower scale (Torra 2015, Elson 1999).

3.1.3 Intersectional lens: Gender as a process and gendered labour markets

The extent of inequality in the social status between men and women must also account for how gender interacts with other structures of social hierarchy such as class, caste, martial status, migratory status, age, race etc. Men and women from different social status groups may command more resources, rights and prestige than those from other groups (Agarwal 1997). Hence, the application of an intersectional approach is crucial in order to understand and interpret how the intersection of different social structures produces different outcomes for each individual (Acker 2006). These interactions happen within a framework of connected systems and power structures, such as government, policies, laws, media, unions, NGOs as well as flowing through loosely connected and interrelated process, actions, and practices that exist within a specific context such as a workplace. Job requirements, recruitment practices, informal interactions at work and accessibility to leadership positions all determine the extent of the inequalities reproduced in the workplace (Acker 2006, Colfer et al 2018).

The concept of intersectionality has played a vital role in the analysis of the oppression and discrimination faced by women (Acker 2006). Scholars have used the concept in order to understand and explain the different experiences women face, and how they vary based on how they 'intersect' within the lives of women in a given context. Hence, my research is inspired by my understanding that gender by intersecting with other structures of power creates individual experiences at a given point in time. For example, for a migrant worker the decision of who migrates and why and how decisions are made is affected by gender roles, social relations and structures of power.

3.2 Labour agency

Clearly labour market is shaped by gendered norms and hierarchies where men occupy a more prominent position within the productive economy compared to women (Elson 1981). In order to capture these different and individualized experiences I will utilize the concept of labour agency and decent work to explore how the choices and decisions of an individual is constrained or facilitated by wider social norms and gender relations existing at a particular time.

Labour has always been an important part of the global production process; hence a lot has been written on the exploration of labor agency within the specific context of a global supply chain. Herod, one of the earliest contributors to the concept, asserted the importance of the worker and their role in "making space to ensure their own reproduction and survival" (Herod in Hauge and Fold 2016 pp125, Carswell 2016). However, he looked at agency from a rather narrow standpoint of collective agency of organized workers, usually operating as trade unions. Further, Herod paid very little attention to unorganized workers, whether from the standpoint of individual or collective agency. This understanding was limited when faced with the decline of formalized trade union activism in the global north, coupled with increased fragmentation of the supply chain in the global south and growth of unorganized

labour. From this perspective, while not taking away from the role of trade unions and other organisational structures in developing countries, scholars such as Rogaly, Carswell and De Neve hypothesize that labor agency in supply chains is predominantly exercised at an individual level through “micro-level decision-making processes in terms of entering and exiting particular forms of work organization, workplaces, and occupations” (Lund Thomsen 2013 pp72, Caswell 2013).

Neilson and Pritchard further extended this understanding by asserting the impact local factors such as local socio-economic and employment contexts such as gender norms, migrant status, age, caste, location of workers, livelihood alternatives and modes of recruitment, etc have in enabling or constraining the agency of workers. They titled this the “horizontal’ approach’ which “considers localized forms of production organization as well as the livelihood strategies, social norms and relations of reproduction that shape workers’ engagement with global production networks” (De Neve 2012, pp2, Lund Thomsen 2013). This was supported by the work of Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) that called for the need to “re-embed the agency of workers in the social relations that condition their potential” (from Carswell 2016, pp135). They emphasized the linkage of the sphere of reproduction to the workplace, labour market and other regulatory spaces of the productive economy (Carswell 2016).

For this research paper, I seek to explore agency in spaces of quality of employment and household dynamics, as I will elaborate in section 3.3 For migrant workers, these spaces are varied and can be their place of living, the routes they travel, the space where workers can meet with contractors to bargain for their wages, etc. Therefore, I draw on the work of the scholars such as Rogaly (2009, on unorganised migrant workers), as well as Carswell and De Neve (2013) who emphasize the importance of “workers’ everyday and micro-level practices (which) are replete with agency that has ramifications for the wider structuring of the economy” (pp64). For example, for migrant workers, mobility across space is an important aspect of agency as can be used to improve livelihood, while at the same time forces employers to acknowledge and adjust to a more fluid labour force (Rogaly 2009, Carswell and De Neve 2013).

Usually, agency is not formally organized but is composed of individual actions that may be subtle and unorganized and can have diverse manifestations since they are embedded in broader social and community relations. For example, agency can be constrained or be facilitated by the way in which a worker opts in and out of particular forms of employment such as shifting from full time employment to home-based work (Carswell and De Neve 2013, Lund Thomsen 2013, Rogaly 2009). Hence, the focus of this paper is on forms of labour agency that are neither formally organized and institutionalized, nor collective in nature yet can highlight the workers’ ability to strategize and act in a way that achieves incremental changes in the context of their spaces of production and employment (work, access to accommodation, transport etc) (De Neve 2012). However, while it must be recognized that changes brought on by workers expression of agency can be short lived, its impact on “workers spatially embedded everyday lives can be significant to workers themselves both materially and in relation to the subjective experience of employment” (Rogaly 2009, pp2).

3.2.1 Katz categorization of labour agency

As discussed in the section above, this research paper seeks to expand the understanding of labour agency beyond collective action of workers in organisation and unions etc and instead emphasise the individual agency exercised by workers and consider how this agency is shaped by worker identities as well as intersection of gender, age, migration status, and socio-economic condition etc. In an attempt to disaggregate and developed a more nuanced concept of agency into different levels based on the actions, strategies or practices, Katz provides a

threefold classification of (i) resilience (everyday coping practices), (ii) reworking (efforts to materially improve the conditions of existence) and (iii) resistance (direct challenges to capitalist social relations) (Hauge and Fold 2016). In order to understand how it can be applied, a detailed understating of each classification is necessary.

- Resilience practices has to do with how individuals and groups are getting by or are coping when faced with oppressive/shock like conditions, and how they find creative or new ways of surviving. Such practices do not challenge the existing status quo (Hauge and Fold 2016 and Lund Thomsen 2013).
- Reworking practices involve workers' efforts to improve the conditions of their lives in a material way, driven by offering pragmatic solution to challenging conditions (Hauge and Fold 2016). This sometimes also results in reforming or even undermining the existing system, structural constraints and social relations affecting everyday life (Lund Thomsen 2013).
- Resistance practices are explicitly oppositional in nature and relate to confronting and challenging exploitative production regimes. For example, strikes and demonstrations are direct forms of resistance. Hence, due to its oppositional nature, acts of resistance are usually much rarer than resilience or reworking in developing countries where unionization and collective bargaining is low (Lund Thomsen 2013, Hauge and Fold 2016).

These forms of labour agency are structured within a fixed geographical and societal dimension. This essentially means that micro level decision making processes are embedded in a location specific structuring of capital, labour markets and state. However, it is the worker position that shapes the form of agency taken. Hence, other factors that extent beyond the worker such as gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, socio-economic status, the influence of the household, etc also need to be considered. For example, an individual decision to migrate is the result of the livelihood strategy adopted, which is in turn shaped by the wider concerns related to the sphere of reproduction and social relations such as out of desire to escape poverty, family pressure or generally for a better life (Hauge and Fold 2016, Lund-Thomsen 2013).

3.2.2 Role of other actors in enabling or constraining agency

As discussed in the sections above, the expression of labour agency is shaped by the structural, organizational and social arrangements of the workspace (Hastings and Mackinnon 2016). In other words, "labour agency is always relational, and never completely autonomous" (Coe and Jordhus-lier 2011, pp221). Hence, other actors such as the workplace, trade unions, NGOs and brands play an important role in facilitating and/or constraining worker agency. For example, the workplace can encroach on the workers by creating insecurities through workplace monitoring, temporary contract jobs etc, which can limit workers' ability to unionize. Similarly, trade unions can play a key role in strengthening worker agency by articulating their interest and through enabling freedom of association. Conversely, a low level of unionization can act as a limiter, making it difficult for workers to organize themselves and limiting their ability to exert their agency (Rydzik and Anitha 2019, Anwar and Graham 2019, Schmalz, et al., 2018). Therefore, understanding the intersections of power structures on workers everyday life sheds light on the workers agency and factors that constrains or facilitates it.

3.3 Examining labour experiences: Quality of employment and household dynamics

In order to analyze a gendered workspace through an intersectional lens and to determine the forms of agency expressed, it is necessary to construct appropriate indicators that captures their labour experiences. For the purpose of my research, I will be using the decent work framework as defined by the ILO to outline what indicators constitute labour experience of workers in the supply chain. Decent work is a multidimensional concept that sums up the aspiration of people in their working lives, in other words how they are able to live their work lives. It comprises of four key pillars - employment, social protection, rights at the workplace, and social dialogue (Barrientos 2007, International Labour Organization 2013).

Figure 3.2 below represents the two key categories. The first is quality of employment, which is defined from the perspective of the individual where if certain conditions such as safety and health at work or remuneration is favourable or social security of workers are met, then quality of employment is high (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe 2015). These consist of nine indicators. The second are indicators related to household dynamics, which consist of four indicators related to care work, domestic violence, access to healthcare and nutritious food. These are drawn from the decent work agenda that are linked to the four pillars as defined by the ILO. The elements for quality of employment will later act as a guide for the creation of indicators by which the individual actions in everyday practices (agency) of the workers will be analysed in the workspace. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list but specifically chosen inductively for my research, as data from the interviews emerged.

Figure 3.2
Substantive elements and corresponding indicators

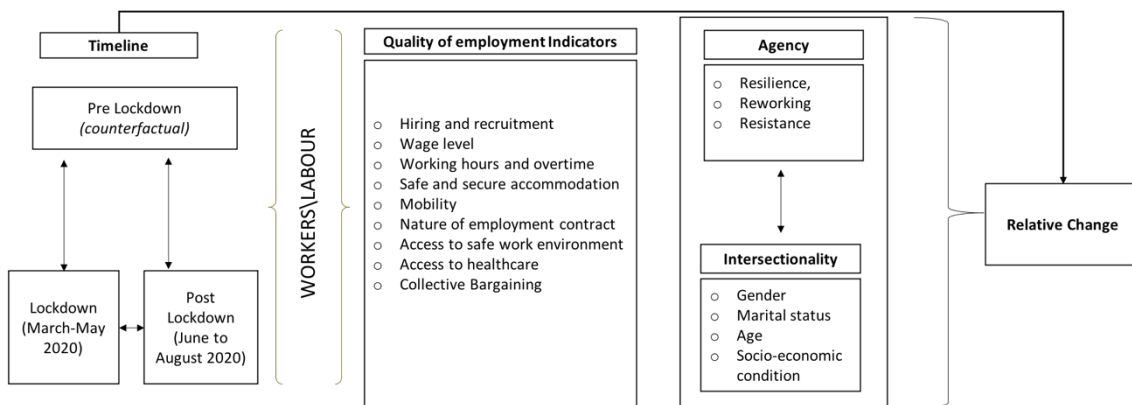
Key elements (drawn from ILO framework)	Substantive elements (as described by ILO)	Indicators which will be applied (created by the author based on research parameters)
Quality of employment	Employment opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hiring and Recruitment
Quality of employment	Adequate earnings and productive work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wage level
Quality of employment	Decent Work Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working hours and overtime Safe and secure accommodation Mobility
Quality of employment	Stability and security of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature of employment contract i.e Permanent worker and contract worker
Quality of employment	Safe work environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to safe work environment (provided by employers)
Quality of employment	Social security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to health care in the workplace
Quality of employment	Social dialogue, workers' and employers' representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collective bargaining
Household dynamics	Combining work, family and personal life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to adequate nutritious food (including access to Govt supported schemes such as PDS) Access to healthcare/facilities Level of violence against women in the household Unpaid care work

Source: Modified from International Labour Organization 2013

3.4 Analytical Framework: Intersectionality and agency

The conceptual framework combines Katz’s notion of agency as practices of resilience, reworking and resistance through an in-depth analysis of individual actions, as well as intersectionality. This will allow a more complete understanding of workers’ labour experience by examining their position at the intersections of gender, age, marital status and socio-economic condition in order to explore how they have been affected by the pandemic, and to what extent they have been able to exercise their agency, in relation to the quality of employment, and discuss if household dynamics influences their decision. This will be examined across the two phases, discussed in section 2.5, lockdown and post-lockdown. Finally, the last box in Figure 3.3 below indicates the relative change that is experienced by female migrant workers, in terms of whether they experience ‘better’, ‘neutral’, or ‘worse’ changes in the quality of employment indicators, across the phases. In the conclusion chapter (7), I will draw on secondary literature, to compare the relative changes in the indicators to the pre-lockdown situation as a counterfactual, this facilitates unpacking the ‘relative extent’ of change experienced during the lockdown. The aim of this research paper is not to quantify these values or present representative findings, but to indicate whether COVID-19 has exacerbated (or supported) labour experiences or not in terms of quality of employment and household dynamics.

Figure 3.3
Analytical Framework



Source: Authors creation

Having introduced key concepts including gender, intersectionality and labour agency in this chapter, I will now proceed to explain the methodology in the next.

Chapter 4 : Research question, methods and methodology

This chapter outlines my research question and the methods employed for collecting and analyzing primary and secondary data.

4.1 Research Questions

How have female migrant workers in Tirupur been affected by COVID-19 and what have been their responses?

Sub questions:

- a. What have been the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experiences of female migrant workers in the household?
- b. What has been the varied responses of female migrant workers in the Tirupur export garment cluster to the ongoing effects of COVID-19 in the lockdown and post-lockdown phase in relation to quality of employment?
- c. Have there been relative changes in the experiences (quality of employment) of female migrant workers the Tirupur export garment cluster in the lockdown and post-lockdown phase of COVID-19?

4.2 Data collection and methods employed

The focus of my research is female migrant workers based out of Tirupur garment cluster. By migrant women workers I mean interstate migrant workers only i.e., those from other parts of India. The Tirupur cluster was specifically chosen due to its prominence within the export garment industry in India and its high intake of female migrant workers from other states who form the core labour force of the cluster.

The period of 24th March to 31st August 2020 has been the chosen for the study. This period has been divided into two phases; the Lockdown phase from 24th March 2020 to 31st May 2020; and the Post-Lockdown phase from 1st June 2020 to 31st August 2020. The reason behind choosing the above fixed period is, firstly, to capture the early effects of the fallout of the ongoing crisis and subsequent containment measures on the garment cluster which was unprepared for it. Secondly, to understand how female migrant workers, unarguably one of the most vulnerable segments of people, responded to these crises at particular times, locations, and contexts across the two phases. This will paint a picture of their experience during the pandemic and economic crisis. However, it is important to recognize that COVID-19 is an ongoing crisis and therefore, all effects on female migrant workers cannot be attributed to COVID-19 alone.

The research involved a qualitative approach. Primary data was conducted through semi structured interviews with the female migrant workers and collected via phone and video calls. The aim of the interviews was to elicit an understanding of their lived realities. A total of eight interviews were conducted with migrant workers through a purposive and snowball sampling: Five were women and three were men. Their ages ranged from 20-35 years. The purpose of the interviews with the male migrant workers was to draw a comparison. The data gathered is not a generalization or representative of the condition of all migrant workers

in Tirupur but provides in-depth evidence for particular female migrants. Figure 4.1 below have key socio-demographic and other details of each garment worker interviewed.

Figure 4.1
List of garment worker interviewed

Name (changed to protect privacy)	Age (years)	Sex (F/M)	Education (level)	Marital Status	Union member (Yes/No)	Employment type	ESI/PF	Wages (INR)	Accommodation Type	Main earner (Yes/No)	Left Tirupur during lockdown
Maya	20	F	12th	Unmarried	No	Short term Contract	No	9000	Hostel	No	No
Rita	25	F	BA	Married	No	Short term Contract	No	10,000	Independent dwelling	No	No
Afsha	31	F	5th	Married	No	Short term Contract	No	9000	Independent dwelling	Yes	No
Ayesha	32	F	5th	Married	No	Short term Contract	No	9000	Independent dwelling	Yes	No
Suman	35	F	8th	Divorced	No	Short term Contract	No	11,000	Independent dwelling	No	Yes
Sajan (Rita's husband)	28	M	12th	Married	No	Permanent	Yes	12,000	Independent dwelling	Yes	No
Asim	22	M	12th	Unmarried	No	Permanent	Yes	12,000	Independent dwelling	No	Yes
Saleem	26	M	12th	Married	No	Permanent	Yes	11,000	Independent dwelling	Yes	Yes

Source: Authors construction

The focus of the interview with migrant workers was to understand, on one hand, their home dynamic in terms of access to social and material resources and other effects of COVID-19 on social relations. On the other hand, their employment experience during the months of March to August 2020, as well as their reflection on those experiences. The interviews were conducted between 4th and 6th October 2020, each interview took approximately 45 to 60 minutes. All were conducted in Hindi, with interview notes subsequently transcribed into English. Consent from each participant was received before beginning the interview. Furthermore, participants were given the freedom to not answer or withdraw from the interview at any point of time. All participants were offered anonymity; hence pseudonyms were used to protect their identity.

Alongside interview with migrant workers, the research also draws heavily on semi-structured interviews conducted with three Non-Government Organization's (NGO), a leading clothing brands, a factory manager, an asian labour-led International organization, and Labour expert.

Figure 4.2
List of elite interviews

S. No.	Interviews	Location	Mode
1	NGO 1	Tamil Nadu	WhatsApp call
2	NGO 2	Tamil Nadu	MS Teams/Zoom
3	NGO3	Tamil Nadu	Google
4	Brand	Delhi	Zoom
5	Factory Manager	Tirupur	WhatsApp call
6	International organization	Bangalore	Zoom
7	Expert	Delhi	Zoom

Source: Authors construction

The interview with the above stakeholders was conducted across three months- August to October 2020. Many of the stakeholders listed above were contacted multiple times at different points of the month to receive a more updated idea of the ground realities. The decision to conduct elite interviews with such a diverse set of stakeholders was made in order provide context to my research by gaining an in-depth understanding of the working condition of the migrants, to broaden my understanding of the employment relations in which they are embedded and to assess its influence on the workers experience. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 120 minutes.

While there are both objective and subjective aspects to the narrative of the participants when recounting their experiences, the focus of this research was not only on ‘what actually happened’ but on how they interpreted their experiences. As the interviewer, I remained conscious of my positionality and understood that their account is a self-representation of their life and experiences hence it is fluid, ever changing and embedded in the context of the time period in which it was experienced and subsequently narrated.

For this research paper, data was organized, manually coded and analysed through open coding to draw out key themes and to make sense of textual data. It involves generating initial categories or labels from the raw data gathered. Following the creation of categories, axial coding was done to assemble these data codes in new ways by making linkages, connection, and showing similarities and dissimilarities between the categories.

4.3 Limitations

The biggest limitation for this study was the usage of digital tools due to the restrictions related to travel due to COVID-19. This platform limited the amount of time I could spend on the phone with each participant, and also hid nonverbal cues that may provide useful insights. Furthermore, accessing certain key participants proved difficult due to different time zones and their own personal concerns and difficulties. I was also unable to conduct repeat interviews with garment workers as participants were already quite emotionally and mentally stressed. Therefore, in order to tackle this serious limitation, I reached out to NGOs who are representatives of the migrant workers. All three NGOs who participated in this study

have spent considerable time in close proximity with a large number of female migrant and therefore are justified to speak as their representative on general matters relating to their experiences in the period designated for this research. Another aspect of my research which proved difficult was to gather information on harassment/violence, both within the household and in the workplace. Most migrant workers were hesitant to open up on such a sensitive issue over the phone and hence their wishes were respected, instead information of such matters was sourced from secondary literature and interviews with NGO's.

Chapter 5 : Effect of COVID-19 on migrant women (household dynamic)

In this chapter I explore how has the pandemic affected female migrant workers them in terms of household dynamic. I combined primary data with data collected from secondary literature review in order to examine the effects. Subsequently, I go on to discuss how COVID-19 is not gender neutral and disproportionately affects migrant women by employing gender and intersectionality as analytical frames to discuss findings from interviews with migrant workers and other stakeholders. This chapter looks at the lockdown and post-lockdown phases as a continuous timeline.

The first section (5.1) presents the experiences of female migrant workers in terms of household dynamics. The second section (5.2) provide a discussion on how the intersections of age, gender, marital and socio-economic status shapes their experiences

5.1 COVID-19 and its effect on female migrant workers in Tirupur

The crisis induced by COVID-19 is unprecedented in its magnitude and scale. Women have been disproportionately impacted by the crisis, amongst them, migrant women are the most vulnerable as they possess intersectional characteristics beyond their migrant status that leaves them at a disadvantage during crisis due to an unequal power distribution and gendered social norms that prevent them from accessing basic services such as health care, etc thereby deepening the entrenched structural inequalities (Dugarova 2020). In this research I refer to these as household dynamics (See table 2.1). Examples from the Ebola and Zika outbreaks provide proof of the rise of inequalities pertaining to household dynamics. As a result, migrant women face a greater threat such as falling deeper into poverty, suffering from malnutrition and facing increased violence and exploitative behaviour, etc. (UKAid 2020, WorldBank 2020), which I explicate in the following sub-sections.

5.1.2 Female migrant workers and household dynamics

Level of violence against women in the household

The rise of unemployment due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on thousands of migrant workers in Tirupur, leaving them without jobs or a source of income. Migrant women, belonging to the lowest strata of the labour hierarchy, were the first to be let go (Dugarova 2020). Their already dire situation was further compounded by the failure of state sponsored employment schemes such as MNREGA and PMGKRA to meet the increased needs of the workers. With no wages and other sources of income from alternate livelihood opportunities being scarce, many families had resorted to using their meagre savings (World Bank 2020, ActionAid India 2020). According to interviews with NGO1 and NGO2, for many migrant families their savings were not enough to see them through the lockdown and therefore resorted to securing expensive loans from unregulated money lenders, thereby falling into serious debt.

A serious implication of this rising unemployment and the lockdown such as physical distancing and other isolation measures was the rise of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). According to a statement made by UN women, “violence against women and girls will continue to escalate, at the same time as unemployment, financial strains and insecurity

increase. A loss of income for women in abusive situations makes it even harder for them to escape” (UK Aid2020, pp7).

Past epidemics such as Ebola and Zika, have also suggested that the level of violence shifts with the changing nature and scale of the pandemic (World Bank 2020). This has been seconded by representatives from NGO1, NGO2 and NGO3, who spoke of the stark increase in VAWG faced by female migrant workers as they were ‘trapped’ in the home unable to escape. For women who are already in abusive relationships, being trapped indoor, in small confined spaces only increased the risk of violence (Roesch, et al 2020).

Access to adequate nutritious food

Access to adequate and nutritious food was a matter of grave concern for the migrant workers in Tirupur and was one of the key factors that prompted many of them to make the decision to leave the state as soon as lockdown was announced. Many female migrants belong to poor and marginalized communities and therefore are registered under PDS system for accessing essential commodities/rations such as rice, lentils, oil etc. However, migrants who form part of the floating population struggle to access these commodities as they are not recorded as being residents of the work state. According to a representative from NGO1, many female migrants in Tirupur were unable to access rations as they lacked identity cards. (Asian Floor Wage Alliance 2020, Interview NGO1).

Afsha, a migrant worker living in the slum like clusters in Tirupur with her two sons faced similar challenges as she was not registered in the state of Tamil Nadu. Her situation became even more dismal when her contractor absconded with her wages for the month of March leaving her with pitiful savings and no recourse to state supported food programmes. She was forced take a loan from a money lender, as well as rely on the good will of her neighbours and local NGOs for support. While some migrant women were able to buy food from the money they received via the Jandhan accounts as well as through the PMGKY scheme, she was not one of them.

“My family and I (her self and her two sons) relied on the food we received from the NGO and our community members. Until I started working (in June) we had only two meals a day, sometimes even that was difficult”

Like Afsha, many migrant families struggled to access enough food for their daily needs which often led to many women to forgo one or two meals in the day to ensure her husband and children had enough food (Interview NGO1, World Bank 2020).

Access to Healthcare/facilities

Access to healthcare facilities is another matter of concern for migrant workers living in the semi-urban slums. Most female migrant workers are contract workers who have little to no access to social security benefits such as ESI and struggled to cover their basic health needs even before the onset of COVID-19 (Interview NGO3). However, following the pandemic and their loss of wages and restricted mobility, female migrant workers ability to access, much less afford basic healthcare at state run center was also called into question. This situation was further compounded by an already weak and overburdened public health systems in the country (Varatharasan, 2012).

During COVID-19, representatives from all three NGO’s recounted the struggle faced by migrant women to travel to health centers during lockdown due to harassment faced by police while enforcing the isolation measures. Even after the lockdown began to lift, many of the government run health centers remained closed or severely understaffed, many times turning workers away. With private establishments either too expensive or not COVID-19 sanctioned, many workers had no available medical recourse.

Discussion with representatives from NGO2 and NGO3 revealed that health care workers who were tasked by the government to make regular visits to the slums also did not do so as they feared the spread of the virus. Further, the slums where the migrant workers lived was densely populated with houses packed together, and therefore it was considered a breeding ground for the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Many healthcare workers hesitated to visit these slums as they feared for their health.

Lack of awareness and information on the virus added to the fears of migrant women of being diagnosed Covid-positive and what it would mean for livelihood and social relations. According to representative from the Brand, during lockdown phase, more women than men chose not to visit the doctor if they showed symptoms of COVID-19 for fear of being diagnosed Covid-positive. *“If I feel sick, I stay inside. What is the point of going to the hospital”*; while another migrant worker stated that *“If I get sick (get COVID-19) who will take care of my family”* (as quoted by Brand representative).

Even after the lockdown measures eased and work restarted, women took less precautions than men at the workplace. Based on my interaction with participants of the research, it is clear that such attitude stems from an acceptance of the dangers of current situation as the ‘new normal’ and the need to work and earn a wage far exceeding the fear of the virus.

Unpaid care work

Moving beyond health and economic effects, COVID-19 has impacted gendered social norms surrounding unpaid care work (World Bank 2020). During the pandemic, the shutting down of school, rising unemployment and healthcare needs of the elderly and the sick were all responsibilities of the reproductive economy and hence the ‘domain of the women’ as dictated by gendered norms. It impacted the daily lives of migrant women in ways that re-trenched gender roles and is further complicated by the reduced informal care support from elderly family members who are more vulnerable to the virus (Asian Floor Wage Alliance 2020).

Furthermore, physical distancing from other members of the larger community support network, such as neighbours and friends, due to virus also led to an increase in the unpaid care workload for women. This has serious implication since any migrant women went to work and left their young children with relatives and neighbours. This adversely affected their ability to return to the labour market, thereby having negative repercussions on labour force participation, and division of labour in a post COVID-19 period (UK Aid 2020).

Representatives from NGO2 also indicated that migrant women felt ‘trapped’ within the household due to the isolation and distancing measures during the lockdown period, which affected their mental, physical and emotional health and wellbeing. Therefore, when official lockdown period was over in June, many women left their home state and returned to work. For example, Suman went home in May with the launch of the shramik trains in order to take care of her son who had been in the care of her grandparents, however, the months at home and the constant burden for excessive care work without any form of relief left her feeling confined and trapped. She stated that the burden of care work was one of the factors that motivated her to return to Tirupur earlier than planned.

5.2 Discussion

Firstly, the findings clearly show that the impact of COVID-19 on migrant women in the garment industry has exacerbated existing gender inequalities and worsened the already dire conditions they faced before the onset of COVID-19 (World Bank 2020). The mass layoffs have left women without a source of income. Their low wages has already made it unlikely that they would have saved enough to create any form of financial safety net to counteract the costs associated with the economic shock of COVID-19 and its repercussions such as access to adequate food and healthcare needs. However, when gender overlaps with low socio-economic status it created an added layer of disadvantage and discrimination for many migrant women in Tirupur. It forces them to choose between observing lockdown measures or earning money. This results in many women making sacrifices such as forgoing meals and other essential needs in order to earn money. For workers such as Ayesha and Afsha, both who come from marginalised and impoverished background, are the main earners for their families and hence have the added burden of family obligations which leaves them no options but to take risks with their health and well-being in order to provide for their children. When Ayesha was asked if she feared contracting COVID-19 because of the risks she was taking in order to make a living, she answered with resignation- *‘If it will happen (COVID-19) it is in our fate’*. Maya, another participant of the study was not burdened by these disadvantages as she lived in hostel accommodation due to her young age and unmarried status, and through the hostel she had access to a factory employed nurse, health facility and daily rations that helped see her through this time of uncertainty.

Secondly, the lack of employment, social protection, loss of income and livelihood opportunities only heightened emotional and financial stress faced by migrant workers, leading to an increase in gender-based violence at home. However, while gender-based violence is common amongst garment workers in India, it does not have the same impact everyone equally. According to representatives from NGO2, and supported by secondary literature (Varatharasan, 2012), married migrant women from lower socio-economic status were more susceptible to acts of violence and were less inclined to report it to a local NGOs as many of them normalized it. Similarly, the socially constructed role of women as care givers has become an added burden as unemployment, coupled with lockdown, distancing and other isolation measures has increased amount of unpaid care. However, this care work is disproportionately distributed since for many migrant workers, the elderly can no longer be relied on to provide care work in the household due to the dangers of COVID-19, as a result a large portion of the burden of care falls on younger members of the household, usually women, and even adolescent girls who, many a time, are forced to forgo education in favour of taking on more responsibility. This is more so than ever with the shutting down of schools across the country and the lack of funds of migrant families to afford to access digital platform of education (Interview NGO1, World Bank 2020).

Putting these observations in context, Acker (2006) argument is crucial in acknowledging how the intersections of different social structures produce different outcomes for each individual, not just between women and men but among women themselves. Hence, keeping the household dynamics in mind, in the subsequent chapter where I will discuss the actions and responses of migrant women in the workplace in light of these intersection inequalities. This discussion will draw on the ‘horizontal approach’ put forth by Nielson and Pritchard by focusing on how agency of migrant women in the space of employment is also influenced by social relations and reproductive factors (Carswell 2016).

Chapter 6 : Migrant women's practices of agency in a time of COVID-19

In this chapter I answer research sub-question 2 and 3, which are related to discussing the varied responses of female migrant workers in the Tirupur export garment cluster to the ongoing effects of COVID-19 in the lockdown and post-lockdown phase in relation to the indicators associated with quality of employment; and have there been relative changes in the experiences of female migrant workers in the lockdown and post-lockdown phase of COVID-19. I draw on my conceptual framework and employ resilience, reworking and resistance to quality of employment. I also employ intersectionality in order to understand the influences of gender, age, marital status and socio-economic status on decisions made regarding employment.

Section (6.1.1) will cover the lockdown phase of 24th March to 31st May 2020 and section (6.1.2) will cover the post-lockdown phase from 1st June to 31st August 2020. In both sections I explore the responses of migrant women workers to the shifting work environment in Tirupur's garment sector, more specifically, how they manage to juggle their limited human, social, and material resources in order to cope with the demands on their labour market participation. Furthermore, in the last section (6.2) I will discuss the 'relative changes', as explicated in the conceptual framework (section 3.4), which will examine the responses of migrant women during lockdown and post-lockdown where I will ascertain if the agency led to a better, worse or neutral relative change (if any). This chapter will draw extensively on primary interviews.

6.1 Practices of resilience, reworking and resistance in a time of COVID-19

The crisis triggered by COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the daily lives of migrant workers in the garment cluster of Tirupur. Participants interviewed adopted a variety of reactive and proactive actions and strategies as a response to the challenging times brought on by COVID-19 and its containment measures (Rydzik and Anitha 2019).

6.1.1 Lockdown phase: Quality of employment

It has already been established that the living condition of a large majority of migrant workers was dire with low wages, little to no social security benefits and limited access to facilities such as clean water and sanitation. This period also saw contractors absconding and factory owners/employers expressing their inability to pay full or partial wages to workers for work done for a month leading up to the lockdown, as well during the lockdown months despite the advisory by the state authorities to do so. Coupled with the rising costs and demands for rent, food, sanitation and health facilities, migrant workers were pushed into greater indebtedness and poverty (Asian Floor Wage Alliance 2020). With their basic survival called into question, and in an environment of rising fear and uncertainty, many migrants decided to return to their home state.

Below I will discuss how female migrant workers negotiated agency and the forms it took. I will be employing the indicators of nature of employment contract, safe and secure accommodation, and mobility from the category quality of employment as defined in the conceptual framework. These were chosen inductively as it featured prominently during discussion with garment workers. In other words, their status as short-term contract employees

restricted their access to wage and non-wage support during lockdown. The fear and uncertainty coupled with the call for quarantining made the accommodation an important aspect in this phase. Finally, mobility features across both phases, as stated by Rogaly (2009) mobility is an important tool for agency as it can be used to improve livelihood. In this phase mobility will be examined as an expression of agency in the context of logistical and administrative restrictions to movement.

Nature of employment contract

The nature of the employment contract had a significant impact on the forms of support i.e wage or non-wage support workers received. Due to the financial stresses brought on by COVID-19 most contractors/employers, during this period were unable to pay full wages to migrant workers. Some did offer short term loans of approximately 50 per cent of their monthly salary to cover their basic needs. The amount varied between INR500 to 2000 (Asian Floor Wage Alliance 2020). Some factories in Tirupur did provide non-wage support in the form of essential commodities such as rice, lentils, gas etc (Interview NGO3).

However, both wage and non-wage support was based on a clientistic relationship of an informal nature and hence, unevenly distributed. Report by Asian Floor Wage Alliance (2020) and interview with NGO1 indicated that the nature of the worker contract impacted the decision of employers with regard to payment of wages and non-wage support. In this scenario, contract workers, who are usually female migrants, were negatively affected. To illustrate this, I draw on examples from my interview below.

Asim and Saleem, two migrant male workers, like many others, were unemployed during the lockdown. However, they were assured a job with their respective factories when lockdown would lift, and as permanent workers they have access to ESI and Provident Fund (PF). Further, both workers received a monthly wage of INR1000 and INR 500 respectively during lockdown, as well as non-wage essential goods such as rice, dal, oil etc twice a day from their factories. On probing, it was revealed that both workers had a personal relationship with their supervisors owing to their permanent status as direct employees of the factory. This led them to leverage the permanent status and relationship with the supervisor in order to receive benefits which none of the female migrant workers participating in the study received. On one hand this can be attributed to the fact that none of the female migrant workers were permanent employees, on the other hand, it could also be connected to the fact that all of the female participants only communicated with the contractor and had no connection to the factory manager/supervisory to leverage any relationship.

This goes to highlight the gendered nature of labour agency, whereby men have a higher possibility of 'reworking' this situation as compared to women who rely more often on 'resilience' and coping strategies to get by. In this case, both Asim and Saleem felt no need to rework their situation as they were happy with the support provided by the factory. However, all female participants were not satisfied with what they received (if at all) from the factory but since their responses were filtered through existing power hierarchies which only reinforced the marginalized status of migrant workers (Betteridge and Webber 2019).

Safe and secure accommodation and mobility

For many of the migrant workers in Tirupur, the sudden spread of COVID-19 was a frightening turn of events that left them adrift in a sea of fear and uncertainty. For information most migrant workers turned to their contractors, however, during this phase most contractors had turned off their phones and were not accessible to the workers. According to the representative from NGO1, "*most contract labour don't have any relationship with the factory, only the contractor is their point of contact who handles everything from payments of wages to training and even dismissal*". Without any new information to go on many workers made decisions regarding what

they considered safe and secure accommodation based on their own circumstances. In what follows, I draw on examples from interviews conducted with migrant workers in Tirupur of how they interpreted safe and secure accommodation, and if restrictions in mobility constrained or facilitated it.

Maya, a 20-year-old unmarried migrant from Odisha, has been working in Tirupur for the past year. She was living in a factory owned hostel when news of COVID-19 began trickling-in in early March. She struggled to understand what was happening due to conflicting information being shared with her from her peers and social media/WhatsApp outlets. Like many other migrants, she also faced language barriers. By the third week of March, she was told that the factory might close. Being unable to reach her contractor, who had stopped answering her calls, she was uncertain how to proceed. Given this environment of rising fear and uncertainty, Maya decided to not leave for her native state but live in the hostel where it was 'safe and secure' and where she received food rations. She explained: *"I have no family here, I came alone by bus with others from my village, since they decided to stay in the hostel so did I. I did not understand what was happening"*. For Maya, having a safe and familiar place to live, coupled with regular meals and the support of her community helped her cope with the crisis, even if that meant she would not be allowed to leave the hostel.

However, coping for other migrants meant something different. According to Suman, a 35-year-old divorcee from Odisha, staying in Tirupur was not an option. She lived alone in a 'kamara' (room) in the slum areas outside the factory. When the factory where she worked was shut down Suman was left without any wages, limited savings and with no idea of what would happen next. She was also being harassed by her landlord to pay rent, despite the state ruling asking landlords to forgo rent for a few months. For Suman, a sense of safety and security, both socially and materially, meant returning to her native village but with public transport hard to come by (due to the lockdown), she struggled to survive in Tirupur.

"We struggled a lot during this (time). We went to the contractor requesting that he speak with the company (factory) to give us more benefits during the lockdown however he didn't listen to us therefore we just had to manage with what we had. I even asked for money from home. It was very difficult".

It took Suman till May when factories re-opened, for her to earn the money to access the shramik trains to make her journey home.

Afsha, a 31-year-old mother of two from West Bengal, moved to Tirupur with her sons (aged 12 and 14 years) in order to earn a living since she is the main earner in her family. She struggled to not just support herself but her parents and husband back home. The lockdown was particularly hard on Afsha since her contractor ran away with her salary for March as soon as the lockdown was enforced. This situation was compounded by her inability to access rations offered under the PDS system, as she was not registered in the work state, and the lack of will from her place of employment to provide her any sort of non-wage support. This left her penniless, forcing her to take a loan from a local moneylender as well as to rely on the good intentions of her neighbour and local NGOs. She could not return to her family as she even lacked the money to feed herself and her family while travelling back. Further, she commented that adding three more mouths to feed would just be a burden on her family back home. Therefore, though she wanted to return to her home state chose to remain in Tirupur with her sons and survive as best she can, given her poor socio-economic conditions, while waiting for factories to re-open.

Based on the incidents described above, nature of accommodation and its link to mobility make the latter a crucial form of agency as it not only gives workers the chance to escape exploitation and harassment, but also influences their decision to stay or go (Rogaly

2009). However, the imposition of the lockdown severely restricted this mobility forcing them to rely on short-lived and reactive tactics towards building resilience and ensuring basic daily survival in the face of exploitative and oppressive conditions and employment relations. The decision by migrant workers to stay or leave Tirupur was embedded within their livelihood strategy which was influenced by the needs and concerns of individual themselves, their family and the wider community (Carswell and DeNeve 2013).

Furthermore, the practices of resilience employed by each participant was diverse and contradictory. Socio-economic condition and family obligations led Afsha to stay in Tirupur. This was not because she didn't want to leave but her lack of funds and decision to not burden her family restricted her mobility. Suman on the other hand was not restricted by cost but due to lockdown measures making her unable to access public transport forcing her to wait until shramik trains were running. As a women living alone in Tirupur Suman she felt no obligation to stay, she wanted to return home to take care of her son since physical distancing and quarantine meant her grandparents could no longer take care him. Further, her family were marginally better off enough to send her part of the money for her travel.

Unlike Suman and Afsha, Maya stayed because her community members believed it would be beneficial if they stayed in a 'safe' place where food, shelter and a job was guaranteed. She also felt no obligation to return as she felt she could support herself financially and had access to adequate food and shelter. Therefore, it is clear that Afsha, Maya and Suman are embedded in social relations which can both enable and constrain their agency and decision-making potential. For Suman she faced the added discrimination of being divorced, which she felt could be one of the reasons behind her landlord harassing her.

For all of them, returning to their home state or staying in Tirupur was not a solution to the crisis as they were not returning better off than when they left. Hence, the action by the participants, however courageous, were practices that can be characterized by resilience strategies.

Collective bargaining (by exodus)

Mobility as a form of agency had a very unusual, yet significant impact on migrant workers. The restrictions to mobility brought upon by COVID-19 led to a mass exodus of migrant workers making their way back to their home states through any means of transportation available including walking thousands of kilometres (due to no access to public transport) (ActionAid India 2020). The action of abandonment and harassment by brands, factory owners and landlords, plus the inability of the state to respond to the needs of the workers, led to what the Society for Labour and Development (2020) referred to as the '*collective bargaining by exodus*'.

In the context of my research, this refers to the actions and policy changes brought upon by the collective actions of thousands of individuals expressing their agency. In this case, while their actions were that of resilience, tied to their need to survive these oppressive conditions, however, the collective nature of the individual acts of agency can be characterized as reworking since it forced the nation and state to acknowledge and amend central level policies which materially improved their lives for the long term. For example, linking aadhar card with the PDS system allowed migrant workers to access rations in any state. This was a policy amended by the central government due to the attention brought by the media on the semi starved and dehumanized state of the migrant workers in their trek back to their home state. Further, the introduction of Shramik trains in May also emerged in response to workers call for mobility within the country exemplified by the exodus. While the workers participating in this act were diverse and fragmented it can still be seen as an occurrence of collective power which developed by giving shape to public opinion through gaining the attention of the media (Interview NGO2, ActionAid India 2020 Asian Floor Wage Alliance 2020). It was

through such micro agency that migrant workers, who lacked material and social capital made the best of a bad situation and by their actions improved aspects of their own lived realities (Carswell and De Neve 2013).

6.1.2 Post- Lockdown Phase: Quality of employment

In the subsection I will employ indicators related to hiring and recruitment, wage level, collective bargaining, Working hours & overtime, healthcare and safety training (chosen inductively). The purpose behind using these indicators in this section is to capture the responses of workers when factories opened, and they returned to work. Mobility continues to feature in this phase as well and will be used in the context of improving their livelihood such as through switching jobs.

Hiring and recruitment, wage level and mobility

Sometimes practices of resilience are not enough in the face of a crisis that irreversibly impacts workers livelihoods, which led many migrant workers to practice reworking by reclaiming their resources in order to take advantage of the new opportunities presenting itself. For example, the phased reopening of the factories continued with an increase of new orders rolling in from brands during the unlocking phase. Migrants such as Suman who had journeyed back home began to return since livelihood opportunities were slim in their home state. This was further motivated by the new hiring and recruitment policies emboldened by the actions of employers' to bring the workforce back to factories.

“We are bringing them by buses; then we have to keep them in 14-day quarantine. For every person, we are spending INR10,000 in transportation alone. It is as costly as a flight”- Small Factory Owner (Clean Clothes Campaign 2020)

The demand for skilled migrant labour was high in order to meet global demand. This led to a 'call for labour' where employers and contractors were willing to provide incentives to entice migrant workers to return following the easing of the lockdown. Many migrant workers took advantage of their desperation to negotiate a better deal for themselves. For example, Suman realized that the need for skilled tailors like herself was great which led her to renegotiate with her contractor for a job in another factory that not only offered her higher wages but also would take care of her “*kbana and peena*” (food and water needs). She feared the onset of another lockdown and wanted to ensure that not only she had enough savings this time but would not have to suffer in terms of access to basic essential services.

Similarly, a young newly married couple, Rita and Sajan lived in Tirupur where her husband worked as a factory floor employee in the 'cutting' section. During the lockdown he reworked their situation by renegotiating with his supervisor for INR20 more per hour by leveraging his years spent with the factory and his loyalty to the factory. He also got his wife Rita a job with him for the same wage. However, while Sajan saw this move as one that would improve their lives in a material way, Rita saw it differently. As a college graduate and from a higher socio-economic status, she hoped for a better job for herself. However, with the onset of COVID-19 and the need to generate greater savings, she realized she had no choice but to work in the factories. For Rita, it was more a matter of 'getting by' in this time of crisis.

For a worker like Suman, her willingness to rework her situation was related to her own personal interest and built on her knowledge and skills as a source of marketplace bargaining power (Schmalz et al 2018). For Sajan, like the other male participants, he was better positioned within the labour hierarchy to negotiate compared to the female participants in the

study. For Afsha, her belief in contractors was non-existent following him absconding with her money. This resulted in her using her own personal connection to get a job at another factory for the same wage. While this incident proves that there was no material improvement in her life, it did provide her with emotional relief as she no longer relied on contractors for her wage but has direct relation with the factory. By this, she felt that she will have a chance of a better life in the case of another lockdown and therefore can be characterized as 'reworking' within this context.

Through these illustrations it is apparent that the participants other than Maya used their marketplace bargaining power (Schmalz et al 2018), in order to either extract higher wages from the employer or engage in acts that improved their material or emotional well-being.

The reason behind Maya's lack of effort to rework her situation for the better can be tied to her young age, unmarried status and better off socio-economic condition which played to her advantage during this crisis as she had no family obligations or concerns surrounding her basic survival. The lack of financial stress and care responsibilities led to her practicing more short-term reactive strategies to get by without making any efforts to improve her condition in a material way. On the other hand, Suman and Afsha, being older, married, and important contributors to their family income, spent considerably more time trying to rework their current situation in a way that made life better for them.

Collective bargaining: Reworking through resistance

Organized actions around collective bargaining are few and far between among migrant workers in Tirupur due to the heterogeneous nature of the migrant workers (International Labour Organisation 2017). Therefore, it was interesting to see that even though factories had begun reopening by mid-July, many migrant workers were still trying to make their way home. Access to Shramik trains and special buses were proving difficult, causing a great deal of anguish among workers. The lack of public transport led to one of the first instances of resistance where a large protest in the Tirupur train station was organized in mid-July. Approximately 400 migrants demanded that the government arrange cheaper, and more accessible, forms of transportation back to their home states.

The workers did not collectivize with any trade unions or rights body to access their needs, because migrant workers have few opportunities to participate in collective action due to the temporary nature of their jobs. Instead, workers expressed individual agency in an informal way. The effect of this protest led to the government introducing travel arrangements which enabled most migrant workers to make their way home (Interview NGO3). It is important to realize that from a collective agency point of view majority of female migrant workers are not part of any trade unions or association however that does not mean they are disempowered victims of an exploitative and gendered system. As seen in the illustration above, their collective individual action led to a meaningful change in their lives (Bersten 2016). Through this, we can see how workers used their agency to practice reworking through acts of resistance. This cannot be classified as resistance as defined by Katz since they did not confront or challenge the exploitative nature of the garment industry.

Access to safe work environment and healthcare

None of the female migrant workers in the study had access to ESI and benefits related to healthcare hence when factories re-opened they relied on employers to ensure health and safety standards were met. Despite mandate by the state to ensure the same, it proved difficult to achieve basic hygiene protocols required for social distancing on the factory floor and in hostel accommodation (Clean Clothes Campaign 2020, Interview NGO1).

According to Ayesha, her work in the factory puts her in close proximity with other workers. The factory owner asked all workers to bring their own mask, which for Ayesha

was a piece of cloth she can wrap around. While social distancing was supposed to be maintained it is not being followed within the factory. Ayesha went on to say that many times there was no soap or handwash to wash hands and if she made any complaint, she would be shouted at to “*get back to work*”. Occasionally, she tried to bring a bar of soap with her to the factory but after a few weeks she stopped making the extra effort.

On the other hand, Rita’ who started work in the factories in June was given a mask to wear. However, though the factory did undertake some sanitation and health initiatives such as ensuring clean water and soap, they also took matters to another extreme. In the name of immunity boosting against COVID-19, the factory owners made all the workers drink a bitter health tonic on a daily basis. Rita did not know what was in the tonic and, although she did not like it, she has no choice but to drink it because if she refused she feared that she would lose their job. Access to public healthcare, or lack thereof, was also influencing factor cementing their decision to ‘get by’.

Representatives for NGO2 also indicated that social distancing, while considered important by employers, was not actually put into practice-“*I could see factory transport vehicles on the road where 30 seats are filled with 30 people, so where is the social distancing!*”. While workers did fear for their health, they were more concerned with maintaining their job and hence were willing to put up with all manner of treatment, in order to secure a steady income. Many workers also struggled to adapt to the new norms and behaviour related to distancing, restricted movement, and sanitation practices such as Afsha. Hence, just ‘*getting by*’ in these situations was the norm.

Working hours and overtime

Conversation with a leading global clothing brand representative revealed that “*If some aspect of the clothing line is not selling, we cannot afford to give that particular factory business. Therefore, while we honour all existing deals, we have to put business first before factory*”. This statement indicated that while brands have begun placing new orders, such business has not been equally distributed across all factories. Consequently, some factories had more orders and increased working hours, including overtime, compared to others.

Reaction by workers has been mixed. Most migrant workers rely on overtime as a major source of income and therefore increased overtime, while taxing, is often welcome. For example, for Rita, the increase in hourly wage brought a material improvement in their life. However, due to the lower order quantity, the amount of overtime was greatly reduced. This was a source of stress for her. Since the wage increase was negotiated (by her husband) with the factory owner through forming a personal connection, they could not afford to leave the factory and find work elsewhere. As a result, they decided to manage with what was available and make do until order quantity increased. Therefore, while some workers barely had enough overtime, other workers such as Suman had negotiated for more overtime “*I work 12 hour shifts everyday, even Sunday is not free. Even if I have (free) time what will I even do?*”. On the other hand, Maya worked a 8-hour shift with no overtime. While this did impact her earnings considerably, she did not feel the need to work more overtime and actually preferred working fewer hours, unlike Suman and Rita.

It is clear that different workers want different things at different points of time. Having recently married, Rita and Sajan wanted to start a family and hence wanted to build their savings. Suman needs to earn more to save in case of another lockdown so she could bring her son to Tirupur. On the other hand, Maya enjoyed her free time as she was young and single and uses that time to socialize. Since she was not the main earner of the family, she did not feel the need to earn as much as possible.

6.2 Discussion

The Figure 6.1 below captures the relative change in experiences of quality of employment of female migrant workers in the two phases

Figure 6.1
Relative change in quality of employment of female migrant workers

Women workers	Indicator (Intersection)	Phase: Lock-down	Phase: Post-lock-down	Relative change
		Agency	Agency	
Maya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hiring and Recruitment (Gender); ▪ Wage level (Gender, Age); ▪ Working hours and overtime (Socio-economic condition, gender); ▪ Safe and secure accommodation (Marital status, age, gender); ▪ Mobility (Socio-economic condition, Marital status, Gender); ▪ Nature of employment contract (Gender); ▪ Access to safe work environment (Gender, socio-economic condition); ▪ Access to health care in the workplace (Gender, socio-economic condition, marital status) 	Resilience	Resilience	Neutral
Afsha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Working hours and overtime (Age, Socio-economic condition, gender); ▪ Safe and secure accommodation (Age, gender, socio-economic condition); ▪ Nature of employment contract (Gender) 	Resilience	Resilience	Neutral
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hiring and Recruitment (Gender); ▪ Wage level (Gender); ▪ Mobility (Socio-economic condition, Marital status, Gender) 	Resilience	Reworking	Better
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Access to health care in the workplace (Socio-economic condition, gender); ▪ Access to safe work environment (Gender, Socio-economic condition) 	Resilience	Resilience	Worse

Rita	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Safe and secure accommodation (Marital status, Age, gender); ▪ Nature of employment contract (Gender) 	Resilience	Resilience	Neutral
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hiring and Recruitment (Gender); ▪ Wage level (Gender); ▪ Mobility (Socio-economic condition, marital status, Gender); ▪ Access to safe work environment (Socio-economic condition, gender) 	Resilience	Reworking	Better
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Access to health care in the workplace (Gender, Socio-economic condition, marital status); ▪ Working hours and overtime (socio-economic condition) 	Resilience	Resilience	Worse
Ayesha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hiring and Recruitment (Gender); ▪ Wage level (Gender); ▪ Working hours and overtime (Socio-economic condition, gender); ▪ Safe and secure accommodation (Marital status, Age, gender); ▪ Mobility (Socio-economic condition, Marital status, Gender); ▪ Nature of employment contract (Gender) 	Resilience	Resilience	Neutral
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Access to safe work environment (Gender, Socio-economic condition); ▪ Access to health care in the workplace (Gender, Socio-economic condition) 	Resilience	Resilience	Worse
Suman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nature of employment contract (Gender); ▪ Access to safe work environment (Gender, Socio-economic condition); ▪ Access to health care in the workplace (Gender, Socio-economic condition, marital status) 	Resilience	Resilience	Neutral
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hiring and Recruitment (Gender); ▪ Mobility (Socio-economic condition, gender); ▪ Wage level (Gender); 	Resilience	Reworking	Better

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Working hours and overtime (Age, Socio-economic condition, gender); 			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Safe and secure accommodation (Marital status, gender); 	Resilience	Resilience	Worse

Source: Authors construction

The illustrations in this chapter provide a clear understanding of how agency of female migrant workers is shaped by employment relations and intersecting categories of household dynamics (Bernsten 2016). Furthermore, the table above highlights four crucial points.

Firstly, since most migrant workers come from impoverished backgrounds and chose to migrate in order to make a better life, income is important. Therefore, they usually prefer to keep their acts of agency restricted to either practices of resilience to sustain themselves and acts of reworking in order to turn existing employment relation to their own advantage (without affecting the status quo). By keeping it restricted to practices of resilience and reworking they had a higher likelihood of reaping dividends. Most migrant workers choose not to be involved in acts of resistance such as organized strikes or protests. In the case of COVID-19, the lack of resistance strategies could also be associated with the self-distancing and isolating measures which kept workers far away from not just each other, but also from employers and government officials who became even harder to access due to distancing measures.

Secondly, being flexible and mobile is a key form of agency and was an overarching practice across both phases. All female participants in the study were contractual employees and hence had limited job security as a result none of the participants felt a sense of loyalty to the employers and were willing to shift if the opportunity arose. Hence, when excessively oppressive conditions arose with the onset of COVID-19 mobility was a powerful tool through which workers could express their agency without actually attempting to change the power imbalances that existed. It manifested in both acts of resilience and acts of reworking, depending on when and how it was practiced. For example, when Suman left Tirupur to escape an exploitative situation she was practicing resilience, however, on return she re-negotiated her wage rate and hours of work in a way that materially improves her livelihood, which was an act of reworking.

Thirdly, the results of the resilience and reworking strategies were not the same for all participants but were unevenly distributed for the same acts based on each participant existing access to social and material resources and household dynamics. For Saleem, Asim and Sajan, their gender status as male permanent workers place them higher up the labor hierarchy which allowed them greater opportunity to rework their situation irrespective of their age, socio-economic condition or marital status. However, female participants in the research were all restricted by their gender and relegated to acts of resilience in greater frequency as compared to their male counterparts. Even in the acts of resilience and reworking the experiences of the female migrants varied, influenced by her intersection of other social categories. For example, for Maya, her youth, single status and higher socio-economic status helped her cope during the crisis by relieving her of burdens associated with care work and familial responsibility. Afsha on the other hand had responsibilities associated with her status as married women and lower socio-economic condition which precluded her from enjoying the same liberties as Maya.

Lastly, the choice between resilience, reworking (and resistance) was tied to the ‘temporality of the threat’ i.e duration of the crisis (Betteridge, and Webber 2019). In other words,

information on the COVID-19 pandemic was initially scarce and with the crisis still ongoing, workers' decisions during the lockdown phase were usually short-term resilience strategies related to survival. However, as the months went on, the post-lockdown phase saw reworking strategies associated mainly with wages and hours of work, which had a longer-term impact and materially improved livelihood. By this argument it is possible that if COVID-19 continues to disrupt the livelihood of migrant workers, resistance practices may emerge as a long-term strategy to ensure a more permanent material improvement in lives.

In conclusion, by putting individual agency in the center, the actions and strategies applied by migrant women can be located in the context of the stratified, differentiated and gendered garment sector employment in Tirupur where household dynamics and intersection of gender, age, marital status and socio-economic condition can act as structural barriers curtailing (or enhancing) the agency of the migrant workers (Anwar and Graham 2019). Further, by looking from this perspective, the agency of migrant women will move beyond the simple classification of them as 'vulnerable victims' but can be understood in the context within which it was applied and enacted (Rydzik and Anitha 2019, pp8).

Chapter 7 : Research implications and Conclusion

COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on the life and livelihood of migrant workers in the garment sector. It has deepened the pre-existing inequalities, laying bare the precarity of social, political and economic systems. Women, more specifically migrant women, have been disproportionately impacted by the crisis across every sphere ranging from basic healthcare to social security to safety at home (World Bank 2020). In this research paper, I examined how the ongoing crisis of COVID-19 has affected female migrant garment workers in Tirupur in terms of household dynamics around social relations and reproductive responsibilities (Carswell and De Neve 2013). I then discussed the varied responses of female migrant workers in the workspace in relation to quality of employment. This was done across two phases, namely, lockdown (24th March to 31st May 2020) and post-lockdown (1st June to 31st August 2020).

For this research, I engaged with the concepts of intersectionality in order to capture the interactions of gender, age, marital status and socio-economic condition and how they resulted in differences in experiences of migrant women. I also drew on the concept of agency through Katz's classification of resilience, reworking and resistance to create a framework to demonstrate how agency is composed of individual actions that can have diverse manifestations in quality of employment. This is because the female migrant workers are embedded in broader social and community relations which are both unequal and asymmetrical (Rydzik and Anitha 2019). This research enhances understanding of how the decisions made by female migrant workers in times of crisis are influenced and shaped by their relationship within the local labour market in terms of who gets what, and how their own socio-economic background, family obligations and immediate circumstances influence these decisions (Carswell and De Neve 2013).

Through my research I have established that the garment industry in Tirupur is a site of discrimination and harassment, where women are subordinate to men (Elson 1981), and where traditional forms of resistance have limited impact. Female migrant workers in particular are some of the most marginalized segment within the labour hierarchy. Women occupy lower status and pay, and migrants lack social ties and familiarity with employment practices (International Labour Organisation 2017, Elson 1981). The spread of a crisis like COVID-19 has further widened the gendered and socio-economic inequalities that are part and parcel of the garment industry (ActionAid 2020). The research conducted into the experiences of female migrant workers in Tirupur during the lockdown and post-lockdown phases has shown that as a result of their position at the intersection of inequalities around gender, age, socio-economic condition, marital status, they face increasing (and varying) levels of gender-based violence at home and unpaid care responsibilities. It also indicated challenges to accessing basic healthcare and adequate and nutritious food were enhanced and deeply rooted in the failure of the state mechanism to ensure a robust public healthcare and food distribution system (Varatharasan 2012). These challenges are tied to both the direct impact of economic and financial insecurity brought upon by loss of jobs and wages, as well as indirect impact of gendered social norms surrounding distribution of care responsibilities.

Keeping the household dynamics in mind, this research examined the quality of employment of migrant workers in Tirupur in order to ascertain their response to the changing environment brought upon by COVID-19, and the influence of household dynamics. Drawing from primary interviews, the results showed that household dynamics had a significant impact on the decisions made by migrant women. For example, for Suman, her increased unpaid care responsibilities spurred her decision to return home, while for Afsha, ensuring access to adequate food and undertaking care responsibilities were both key factors

influencing her decision to find a new job. However, that being said, findings also revealed that though the garment sector is entrenched in gender labour norms and asymmetric power relations, it has also become a site of resilience and reworking where migrant women showed accounts of survival and endurance in difficult times. On one hand, migrant women seemed to internalise gendered assumption around capacity for hard work, docility and normalised exploitative working conditions. On the other hand, they also identified actions and decisions through which agency was exercised in a way that materially improved their life in the face of oppressive and shock like conditions brought upon by the COVID-19.

Figure 7.1 below highlights the overarching relative change for female migrants that took place across the three phases (before lockdown/pre-lockdown, lockdown and post-lockdown), divided by indicator of the category quality of employment, and the form(s) of agency that were practiced.

Figure 7.1
Overarching relative change for female migrants

Indicator	Overarching relative change for female migrants	Forms of agency
Hiring and recruitment	Before lockdown, hiring and recruitment practices were primarily done through contractors. However, with the onset of Covid19 and the lockdown phase, contractors absconded or were unreachable. Workers began to lose faith in contractors. This coupled with the demand by employers for skilled migrant labour in the post-lockdown phase led to the increase of a more direct hiring and recruitment process.	Resilience and reworking
Wage level	Low wages received by female migrant workers was the norm in the pre-lockdown period. During the lockdown phases, wages were further slashed or cut altogether, even for work already done. This severely affected the well-being of the workers. As a result, in the post lockdown phase, workers tried to take advantage of employers' desperation to renegotiate their wages.	Resilience and reworking
Working hours and overtime	Long working hours and overtime was a regular part of a migrant life as a worker. However, during the lockdown phase the lack of works depleted the savings for many workers. As a result, in the post lock down phase the demand for overtime had increased in order to be more financially secure.	Resilience and reworking
Safe and secure accommodation	Hostel accommodation was a source of safety and security for women in the pre-lockdown phase, although mobility was restricted. There was not much change in the lockdown and post lockdown phase other than a rise of restrictions towards mobility due to the fear around the spread of Covid19	Resilience
Mobility	Mobility was overarching in this scenario. In the pre-lockdown phase, mobility was used as a way to materially improve their lives such as by changing jobs within a factory or location of work. In the lockdown phase, mobility was restricted due to state imposed sanctions and containment measures. Hence, mobility in this phase was used more as an individual act of survival which ultimately led to the infamous collective mass exodus of migrants. In the post-lockdown phase mobility was again used as a tool to improve their livelihood similar to the pre-lockdown phase.	Resilience and reworking
Nature of employment contract	Female migrant labour continued to be contract labour involved in temporary short-term contract spanning a season to a few years. This continued to be the norm in the lockdown and post lockdown phases.	Resilience
Access to safe work environment	Workers faced a number of safety hazards in the workspace. Despite provision being in place, none were really ensured. In the lockdown phase a whole set of new safety parameters were to be enacted however as the post-lockdown phase indicated, none were really followed. Hence, the danger to migrant workers has increased with the phases	Resilience
Access to health care in the workplace	Most migrant women do not have access to ESI and the health benefits related to it. Hence, when the lockdown phase hit, many suffered due to this limited access. The post lockdown phase saw no change in formal health care and practices but a rise of informal health-based supplements of which no proof of its benefits exist	Resilience
Collective bargaining	No change in collective bargaining regarding changes in institution and structures that make up the garments sector. Trade unions were a source of collective bargaining, however in in all three phases of pre-lockdown, lockdown and post-lockdown, workers did not engage.	Resilience

Source: Authors construction

As the table indicates, migrant women in the study showed various degrees of agency at different points in time, which was heavily influenced not just by their gender but by their status as married women (in the case of Rita, Afsha and Ayesha), by increased burden of unpaid care work (Suman) and by age (Maya). This was in line with the argument extended by Rogaly (2009), Neilson and Pritchard who asserted that impact of local factors such as gender norms, age, etc have an enabling or constraining effect on worker agency in the sphere of production (Lund Thomsen 2013).

Further, many of the female migrant workers in the study, while acknowledging the power asymmetries within the garment sector, were also active agents of change, especially with regard to indicators related to hiring and recruitment, wage level, hours of work and overtime and mobility. Throughout this research process, it is important to recognize that responses of migrant women, expressed through resilience or reworking practices were incremental and for some, temporary in nature. How they utilized their limited social and material resources depended on their calculations of the duration of the crisis of COVID-19.

It is only by examining the meaning and limits of workers understanding and actions that attention can be drawn to the fluidity that interconnects and mutually sustains categories of resilience, reworking (and resistance) in the space of employment which is shaped by personal attributes and their position in the household. Acts of resilience and reworking are elements of an ongoing and continuously shifting socio-economic restructuring process which not only shapes the life and livelihood of migrant workers but has an impact on the extended family and community members, peers and the regional and cultural environment of the garment industry as a whole (Carswell 2016).

Going forwards, policy should be centered around not just exiting the crisis in one piece but building a more equitable and inclusive society where government can formulate gender responsive social and economic plans and policies. All intervention should incorporate sex-disaggregated data in order to capture the disproportionate impact on women and take specific targeted measures to address it. For example, migrant women in particular are vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity which can force them to adopt extreme, and sometimes negative, coping mechanisms. Similarly, more attention can also be paid to multiple care responsibilities which go undocumented and unaccounted for. Collective responsibility should also be a mandate where government and other parties like brands, employers and NGOs work together to address financial and organizational barriers that restrict migrant women from access essential services such as healthcare. In sum, it is important that governments try to balance the trade-offs between exiting the crisis while protecting migrant women who are some of the most vulnerable segments of the society.

Regarding further research, it will be useful to explore agency in times of crisis through the intersectional lens of religion and caste, since their expression of agency will paint a very different picture in terms of access to, and utilization of, social and material resources. Further, exploring the impact of the crisis on adolescent girls, and the expression of their agency, will be another key area that requires more attention of policy makers and development practitioners alike. Finally, the Covid-19 crisis is not over, and further research will be needed to continue investigating the continued gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis on migrant workers.

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