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

NEW DELHI: Savitri Devi has been searching for work since she lost her job at a garment factory in New Delhi, along with half her co-workers, when sales plummeted at the start of the coronavirus pandemic last year.

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

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

Devi is one of around 15 million Indians who have been made redundant in an economic slowdown that has hit women disproportionately, trade union and industry leaders said.

Most employed women in India are in low-skilled work, such as farm and factory labour and domestic help, sectors that have been hit hard by the pandemic.

Worse, an anticipated slow economic recovery, the closure of thousands of factories and a sluggish vaccination rate, especially among women, is expected to undermine their attempts to return to the workforce.

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

The second wave of the coronavirus pandemic is expected to deepen economic stress in India, which was already in its worst recession for seven decades.

With the vast majority of Indians working in the informal sector, precise estimates of job losses are difficult.

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

The Consortium of Indian Industries (CIA), which represents over one million small firms, said women make up 60% of the job losses.

A report by the Centre for Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University found that 47% of women workers who lost their job between March and December - before the second wave of the virus hit in April - were made permanently redundant.

That compared with around 7% of male workers, many of whom were able to either return to their old jobs or take up independent work like selling vegetables.

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

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

In Okhla, home to makers of garments, auto parts and food packaging, employers say they have almost halved their workforce following a dip in orders and a rise in input costs like transport and steel. Chetan Singh Kohli, a printing material manufacturer and an official of Okhla's factory owners' association, said the auxiliary nature of a typical woman's role meant they were not priorities for reemployment.

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

India's informal service sector, including on-demand services like transportation and food delivery, has been one of the few bright spots during the pandemic, said Manisha Kapoor, researcher at the Institute for Competitiveness think tank, but were dominated by men.

"Those informal sector jobs are not something that women will be taking up," Kapoor said.

Kaur warned it could take two or three years for women to return to the workforce - if at all - and urged the government to offer incentives to lure them back.

"Migrant women workers, who have left for their villages with families after job losses, are unlikely to come back," she said.

Traditional household roles in India are further expected to impede women's return to the workforce.

India's female-to-male share of housework is among the highest in the world, and women are bearing the majority of childcare with schools still closed due to the pandemic.

"The work is available in faraway factories but I can't go as there is no one at home to take care of my children," said Chineya Devi, 32, who lost her job in an Okhla packaging firm earlier this year.

Many of the women Reuters spoke to stressed the damage from job loss to their self-esteem, leading to mental and physical health issues.

"Our men at home or government officials could never understand the impact of job losses on women," said Ritu Gupta, who owns a playschool in Najafgarh, on the outskirts of Delhi, that has been closed for over a year.

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

Japan says Belarus athlete safe as US, EU condemn Lukashenko

Japan said on Tuesday that it is keeping a Belarusian Olympian who took refuge in the Polish embassy "safe" as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced a formal investigation into the incident and the United States condemned Belarus's attempts to send her home as intolerable "transnational repression".

Krystsina Tsimanouskaya, 24, sought police protection on Sunday during a Tokyo airport standoff to avoid returning to Belarus, where she believes her life would be in danger.

The sprinter, who said she was taken to the airport against her will because she had criticised her team's coaching staff, has now been granted a humanitarian visa by Poland.

Her supporters say she will fly to Warsaw on Wednesday and that her husband, Arseni Zhdanevich will join her there.

In the meantime, Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi said on Tuesday: "We, in cooperation with relevant parties, are trying to keep her safe".

"She is now in a safe situation," he added.

The incident has focused attention on Belarus, where police have cracked down on dissent following a wave of protests triggered by an election last year which the opposition says was rigged to keep President Alexander Lukashenko in power.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a tweet that the Lukashenko government "sought to commit another act of transnational repression" by "attempting to force Olympian Krystsyna Tsimanouskaya to leave simply for exercising free speech".

"Such actions violate the Olympic spirit, are an affront to basic rights and cannot be tolerated," he added.

The European Union, meanwhile, welcomed Poland's decision to grant Tsimanouskaya a visa and said the repatriation attempt was further evidence of "brutal repression" by the Belarusian president.

In Tokyo, IOC spokesman Mark Adams told reporters on Tuesday that the body had spoken to the athlete twice on Monday, that she was in a safe, secure place. He said the IOC needed to know all the facts before taking further action.

"We are expecting and have asked for a report from the National Olympic Committee of Belarus for today (Tuesday)," Adams said, adding the IOC was still gathering the facts. "We want it (report) today. We have decided to launch a formal investigation. We need to establish the full facts. We need to hear everyone involved."

Asked whether an IOC decision on the matter would come during the Games, Adams said it was not possible to estimate how long the investigation would take.

"That obviously can take time. We need to get to be bottom of it. How long that will take I do not know," he said.

'Order from above'

The sprinter told a Reuters reporter via Telegram that the Belarusian head coach had turned up at her room on Sunday at the athletes' village and told her she had to leave.

"The head coach came over to me and said there had been an order from above to remove me," she wrote in the message. "At 5 (pm) they came my room and told me to pack and they took me to the airport."

But she refused to board the plane and sought the protection of Japanese police.

Tsimanouskaya, who had been due to compete in the 200-metre sprint, said she had been removed from the team because she had spoken out about what she described as the negligence of their coaches.

She had complained on Instagram that she had been entered in the 4×400 metre relay after some team members were found to be ineligible to compete at the Olympics because they had not undergone sufficient doping tests.

"And the coach added me to the relay without my knowledge," Tsimanouskaya said.

The Belarusian Olympic Committee said coaches had decided to withdraw Tsimanouskaya from the Games on doctors' advice about her "emotional, psychological state".

Belarus athletics head coach Yuri Moisevich told state television he "could see there was something wrong with her … She either secluded herself or didn't want to talk".

A Warsaw-based Belarusian opposition politician, Pavel Latushko, told Reuters that Belarus officials had told Tsimanouskaya's mother that her daughter was a spy for Western governments and that someone from Lukashenko's office approached the mother and asked her to persuade the athlete to come home.

Following her withdrawal from the Games, Tsimanouskaya requested the Court of Arbitration for Sport to overturn Belarus Olympic officials' refusal to let her race in the 200 metres.

But the court said in a statement on Tuesday that Tsimanouskaya "was not able to prove her case to get an interim relief".

Alazeera

Cannot have terrorist camps moving...

From P1

"They need a safe and a democratic future. I think this is where we believe that any government that comes to power in Afghanistan has to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people. So consequently, we cannot have the unilateral imposition of will by any party. Peaceful negotiation should be taken seriously by all the parties. The dialogue, which they are having, there is a need for that to be accelerated," Tirumurti said.

He further noted that these are concerns, which are common to all the members of the Security Council. "We have supported a leading role for the UN since it will definitely help in a lasting and durable outcome to the discussions which are going on."

Tirumurti said durable peace in Afghanistan is important because the security and stability of Afghanistan have "direct implications on the region itself."

Underscoring that durable peace requires a "genuine double peace" — peace within and around Afghanistan, Tirumurti expressed hope that whenever "we start looking at this in the Security Council, which I expect sooner rather than later, that we will look into all these aspects and see how best to support the peace talks which are going on."

"I think it's extremely important for us to have legitimacy to anyone who comes into power. And so we don't want a unilateral imposition of will by any particular party on Afghanistan. That is where the focus has been right now. I don't think we have quite come to the idea of a peacekeeping force in Afghanistan."

Whether the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was a timely and good idea, Tirumurti said he would not comment on a country's sovereign decision.

"It is the prerogative of the United States to decide what they want to do and they have taken a decision. And I think it is important for us as a Security Council to ensure that we jointly support Afghanistan in bringing a democratic and a stable society, which will respect women and minorities," he said.

The US has already pulled back the majority of its forces from Afghanistan and is looking to complete the drawdown by August 31, ending nearly two-decade of its military presence in the country.

Tirumurti added that there is a "requirement for a certain legitimacy" for the people who come to power. "That is important for everyone, not just every member of the Security Council, but for all the neighbours or the regional countries and for all the others."

He stressed that "you cannot get this legitimacy through unilateral actions."

He said the question of a peacekeeping force in Afghanistan down the line has not been formally raised.

Tirumurti said that in discussions with the Secretary-General and other top UN officials, "their main concern is the safety and security of the UN mission there," especially after the recent attack on the UN's main compound in Herat, Afghanistan.

The Kabul Times

Taliban will become a pariah state if take over ...

From P1

He said the question now is "will these leaders rise to the occasion and put country first or will they go down in history as people who put their own interests or the interests of their faction first". In conclusion, Khalilzad touched on Pakistan and its relations with the Taliban. He said: "Pakistan has a special role and responsibility, given also that many Taliban leaders are in Pakistan, located there, to do what it can to encourage peace and a political settlement as soon as possible, for it will be judged internationally also as to whether it has done all that it can or it could to promote a political settlement.

He said peace in Afghanistan is in Pakistan's interests and that many Pakistan leaders have acknowledged this.

The Kabul Times

S.Korea detects its first two cases of Delta Plus COVID-19 variant

SEOUL: South Korea has detected its first two cases of the new Delta Plus COVID-19 variant, the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) said on Tuesday, as the country battles with its fourth wave of infections nationwide.

The Delta Plus variant is a sub-lineage of the Delta variant first identified in India, and has acquired the spike protein mutation called K417N, which is also found in the Beta variant first identified in South Africa. read more

Reports of Delta Plus cases have been few so far, and a handful of countries, including Britain, Portugal and India, have reported some cases.

"The first case (in South Korea) was identified in a man in 40s who has no recent travel records," the KDCA told Reuters in a text message.

Test results in people who have been in contact with the man showed that a family member of his tested positive, but the KDCA did not confirm the patient was infected with Delta Plus.

"The second case was found in an overseas traveller," KDCA said.

Health authorities have said several major vaccines work against the highly contagious Delta variant, which has already become dominant in many countries, but have raised concern new strains may evade some vaccines. read more

Some scientists have said the Delta Plus variant may be even more transmissible. Studies are ongoing in India and globally to test the effectiveness of vaccines against this mutation.

South Korea reported 1,202 new COVID-19 cases for Monday, raising the total to 202,203 infections, with 2,104 deaths.

The country on Tuesday said it has given 20 million people, or 39% of its population, at least one dose of a vaccine, while 14.1% have been fully vaccinated.

South Korea aims to immunise at least 36 million people by September.

US has no feasible strategy...

From P2

The recent weeks' setbacks, where the Taliban could easily overcome the defense forces to overtake multiple districts across the country while approximately 1,000 Afghan soldiers fled to Tajikistan has also rung alarm bells Taliban. Essentially, the US cannot rely on these domestic defence forces for the protection of its diplomats, leaving it with no plausible options.

Preference for an 'over the horizon' strategy

Initially as a part of the 2020 Deal, the US had committed to withdrawing all troops from Afghanistan by the end of May 2021. This could not happen because of the various roadblocks that were encountered during the negotiations such as differences between the involved parties and stalled talks due to boycotts from the Taliban. The Taliban assessed the extension of the May deadline a serious breach of the agreement and resorted to heightened violence in retaliation. Furthermore, the US has now conducted a number of airstrikes this week on Taliban targets, in support of the faltering government forces overtake multiple districts across the country while approximately 1,000 Afghan soldiers fled to Tajikistan has also rung alarm bells strikes in the coming weeks if the Taliban continue to remain violent. This has highly antagonized the Taliban, which has called the airstrikes "disobedience" to last year's agreement and have forewarned unspecified "consequences." This warning would definitely cast more doubts about the extent to which the Taliban could go in order to strike back, which puts the capital in danger, as well as the US embassy and the diplomats who the Taliban had promised not to harm earlier.

To be sure, America cannot abruptly sever all diplomatic and humanitarian engagement, owing to the grave socio-economic and security consequences it would entail for Afghanistan. At the same time, this mandates the presence of personnel on the ground who would act as the instruments to further these engagements. Yet, America also cannot ignore the dire security threat that a severely violent and antagonized Taliban could pose to these personnel and to the embassy. It basically has two options: Either to negotiate with the Taliban to retain some NATO and Turkish troops in the country or completely depend on the Afghan Defense Forces for their security. The first option would appear to be impossible, while the second seems to be dreadfully inadequate based on historical and contemporary precedents. Essentially, this conundrum means that the future of Afghanistan hangs by a thread, without a cogent alternative to evoke any optimism whatsoever.

ORF was established on 5 September 1990 as a private, not for profit, 'think tank' to influence public policy formulation. The Foundation brought together, for the first time, leading Indian economists and policymakers to present An Agenda for Economic Reforms in India. The idea was to help develop a consensus in favor of economic reforms.