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Effects of COVID-19 on Women Workforce in the Voluntary Sector

A Report

A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page consists of two overlapping, curved bands. The upper band is a dark blue color, and the lower band is a bright cyan color. Both bands curve upwards from left to right, creating a sense of movement and depth.

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FOREWORD

The year 2020 proved to be a very crucial stage in human history. It was a year marked by pandemic, lockdowns, chaos on every nook and corner of the world. The 1st case of COVID-19 in India was reported in Kerala, on 27th January 2020 and it was not until March that the government announced a nation-wide lockdown. The situation was all very unprecedented. The public health system was in raptures, thousands of migrants were stranded, many lost their livelihoods, and everyone was living in a constant state of fear and anxiety. The pandemic took a toll on almost all the sectors - private, public, corporates, governments as well as the VS. COVID- 19 has had a long-lasting impact on the functioning and sustainability of Voluntary Organisations (VOs) across the globe including India. Along with the challenges posed by COVID- 19, operational challenges like changing government strategies, depleted resources, stricter regulatory framework, and shrinking operating space for the VOs emerged.

All of this caused a stir in the functioning of the VS as well. The sector faced scarcity in terms of resources - both human and financial which was gravely affecting the relief activities or initiatives undertaken by them to stand with people and the society at large during these vulnerable times.

VANI, being the voice of the sector has conducted a survey to bring to the forefront the challenges faced by the sector during these trying times. Along with this, being an advocate for equality, in this study we have also primarily focused on the women workforce in the sector - the persisting problems and inequalities which became even more glaring as a result of the pandemic. Therefore, this study is a sincere effort to overcome such similar obstacles and strategize possible solutions to mitigate those in future.

In the end, I would like to thank our research team at VANI, Ms. Maumita Banerjee (Programme Associate), Dr. Pallavi Rekhi (Programme Officer) and Ms. Nivedita Dutta (Programme Manager) for successfully undertaking this study.

Harsh Jaitli
Chief Executive Office, VANI

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ABBREVIATIONS

COVID-19 – Corona Virus Disease 2019

VOs - Voluntary Organisations

WFH - Work from Home

WEF- World Economic Forum

VS - Voluntary Sector

GDP- Gross Domestic Product

VANI- Voluntary Action Network India

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 induced lockdown brought the entire world to a halt. The tragedy unfolded before our eyes. Not only was there a complete wreck in the public health system but also in the social, political and economic systems which govern our daily lives. The livelihoods of a large part of the population had been hit- the repercussions of which we are still dealing with, even after two years. Governments soon became concerned about increased unemployment. A report by WEF, indicated that almost 49.3% of senior risk experts believed that there will be mass unemployment, and it will be particularly higher in the younger generation.

Organizations had to come up with innovative methods to deal with the ongoing crisis. All the sectors underwent complete digitization to continue with their work. Yet, the transition to digital platforms varied for different sectors. But it was much easier for organizations who had knowledge of using digital platforms in their daily work and the employees had access to such platforms, unlike several grass-root organizations. WFH became the order of the day. Employees inculcated new skills, behaviour, attitude and values to adapt to the changes in the workforce. They struggled to maintain a work-life balance. They had to deal with their own anxiety because of the uncertainty around the pandemic. In India, 66% of employees had to WFH during the pandemic.

Even though WFH offered increased flexibility to continue the work, it had its own cons as well. In a recent book, 'Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World', Fareed Zakaria suggested, that in case of remote working, teamwork becomes important but also the most difficult to achieve especially for newcomers. It is easier for colleagues with established relationships. But for newcomers, building that level of trust might be a challenge.

Apart from the collective issues, the pandemic aggravated the situation for the women in the workforce. As it is, the economy has always been hard on women. There are several problems which women face in the labour market but are so deeply entrenched that they often go unaddressed. With the lockdown, unemployment rates were sky-rocketing and millions of jobs lost. Working women were already balancing domestic responsibilities along with their official work. With the onset of COVID-19, it is suggested that women had to take on more responsibilities in comparison to their male counterparts ⁽ⁱ⁾⁽ⁱⁱ⁾. This often resulted reduced work hours or discontinuity of jobs. It has pushed women to the financial brink. There are several reasons why an economic crisis hit women more. A pay gap exists, which leads to women earning less. This has for long now contributed to the feminization of poverty. Women have less access to social protection. Women are also more in number in the informal economy. Such low wages and physical jobs made lay-offs a common phenomenon. While there was a seamless transition from physical to remote work in many high paying jobs, it wasn't so in low paying jobs. Thus, the unemployment rate jumped by more than 12%. Initial lay-offs happened in sectors where women were overrepresented, including the service sector, retail, hospitality and tourism. A recent

report by the Center for Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University, suggested that during the first lock-down, only 7% of men lost their jobs, compared to 47% of women who lost their jobs and did not return to work by the end of the year. In the informal sector, women fared even worse. This year, in March-April 2021, rural Indian women in informal jobs accounted for 80 per cent of job losses.

The massive public health crisis also exposed that in India, (and even globally) despite 80% of midwives and health workers were women, they were not a part of the decision-making roles in the sector and were also paid less. The gender pay gap was higher in the health sector in comparison to all other sectors which is almost 28%ⁱⁱⁱ.

A recent global report released that the pandemic will “push 96 million people to extreme poverty”^{iv}, out of which 47 million will be women if a proper course of action is not undertaken. “In 2021, it is expected there will be 118 women aged 25 to 34 in extreme poverty for every 100 men aged 25 to 34 in extreme poverty globally, and this ratio could rise to 121 poor women for every 100 poor men by 2030.”^v The virus has excelled at taking existing tensions and ratcheted them up.

As per the study, conducted by VANI, we have seen that the women in the VS have also had to face similar problems due to the pandemic.

Objectives of the study:

- To understand the transition in the working style in the VS.
- To identify the effect of COVID-19 on women workforce in the VS.
- To understand and come up with effective strategies in terms of the specific challenges that women workforce in the VS have faced during the pandemic.

Primary Data Collection:

Data was collected through Google Forms and in-depth interviews were conducted over phone calls with leaders of several organizations from the VS. The data was collected from 120 respondents, who willfully participated in the study which was followed by an extensive desk research. Our respondent organizations were a blend of small and large-scale organizations in the sector.

Limitations:

- The study was conducted during the pandemic; hence the interaction was not face to face but virtual.
- The respondents are a small sample and are therefore not representative of the whole universe from which they have been drawn.

Transition in the Working Style among the Voluntary Organisations post COVID-19

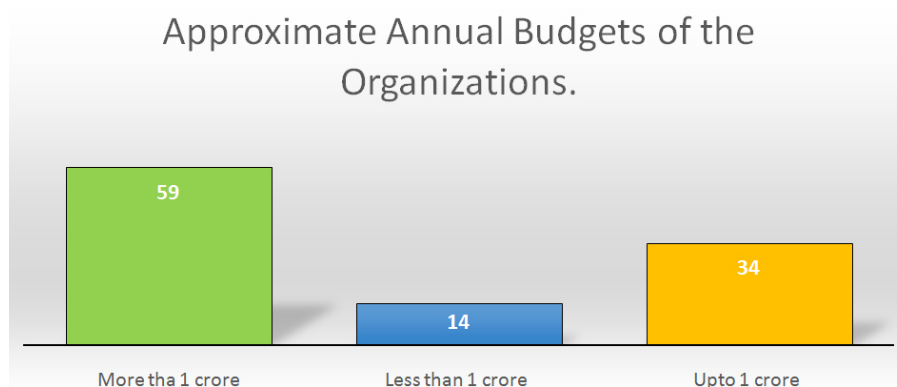
Before COVID-19, just like any other sector, the VS conducted majority of their activities face to face in physical spaces, either in offices or fields, depending upon the typology of work they were engaged in. Several initiatives like capacity building trainings, soft skill trainings, education for women and girls were undertaken by these organizations to strengthen the livelihoods of the marginalized population in the country. As per the telephonic interviews conducted, these initiatives were in-fact gradually achieving their set goals and the beneficiaries and stakeholders were happy with the outcomes. Prior to the pandemic, the organizations were also able to assess and evaluate the initiatives and programmes through direct engagements with the stakeholders.

However, with the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic everything came to a halt. It felt that we, as a human race had reached an impasse. Images of distress, exodus of hundreds and thousands of migrant labourers clutching their meagre belongings, along with their small children, trying to cross state borders flooded across both print and visual media. The trauma was reminiscent of the forced mobility during the 1947 partition.

There was an uncertainty looming over the immediate foreseeable future even for the VS. With the announcement of lockdown on 24th March 2020, the normal functioning and operations of almost all organizations in the VS came to a complete halt. There was utter confusion and chaos everywhere. With the sudden imposition of the lockdown, for most organizations the channels of communication with their stakeholders were severed for days. The situation was far worse in cases where the communities or stakeholders had no proper access to networks by virtue of their locations in the remotest parts of country. They had no information about the ongoing situation or about the safety protocols and restrictions announced by the government.

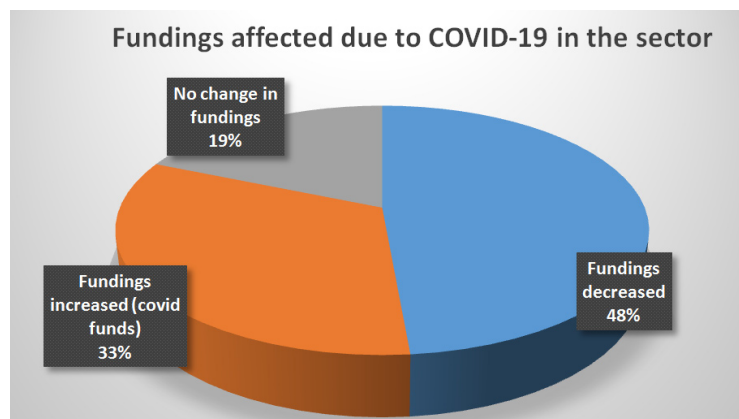
Gradually, almost all organizations did transition to digital platforms, like - Zoom, Google Meet, Google Duo, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter to continue with their daily activities and to keep in touch with the public at large, striving to provide them with authentic information and updates.

The approximate annual budgets of the respondent organizations have been graphically represented in the chart below, representing the size of the organisations (as per the data collected).



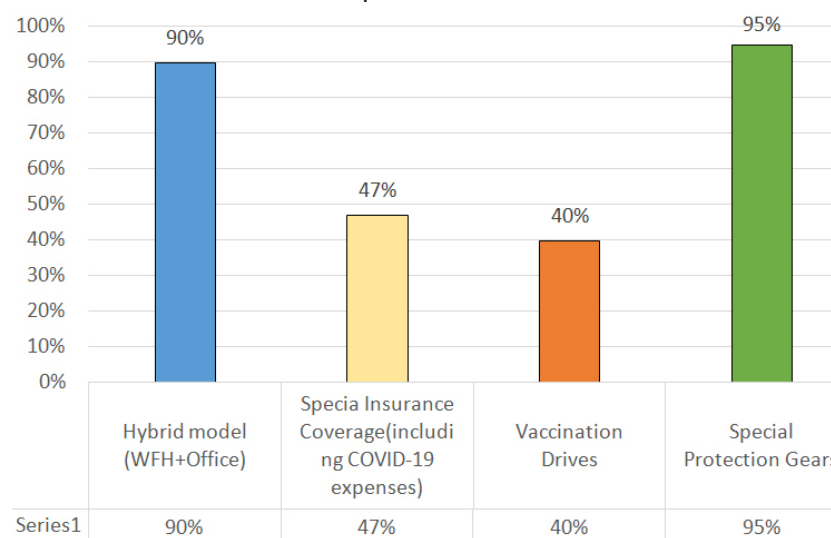
Out of the 107 responses, more than 50% of the organisations fell in the category with an annual budget of more than 1 crore, representing larger organisations, more than 30% had an annual budget of up to 1 crore, representing mid-level organisations, while less than 20% had an annual budget of less than 1 crore, representing smaller organisations.

However, irrespective of their sizes and annual budgets, organizations reported that several projects and initiatives undertaken by them had to be stopped because of lack of proper funding and donations. The reason being that, most donors at the time of the impending crisis, focused all their resources only towards COVID-19 related issues. As a result, only those organizations that were pro-actively working for COVID-19 mitigation received increased funds.



Depending on the type of activities these organisations performed during COVID-19 mitigation, their existing funding was impacted. Apart from 19% of the respondent organisations that did not experience any increase or decrease in their funding, all the others either enjoyed a rise in donations or decline in their existing pool of donors.

Despite all these challenges, the sector was agile and resilient enough to cater to the needs of different groups of people across the country. It played a pivotal role in COVID-19 mitigation responses which is commendable and impressive¹.



The pandemic also made us realise what really matters in life. This gave the sector an opportunity and enough time for introspection as well. Thereby, several organizations tried cooperating

and standing with their employees during this difficult phase. Along with WFH facilities, flexible working hours, there were also several special measures which were undertaken to provide protection to employees. This has been indicated in the chart above.

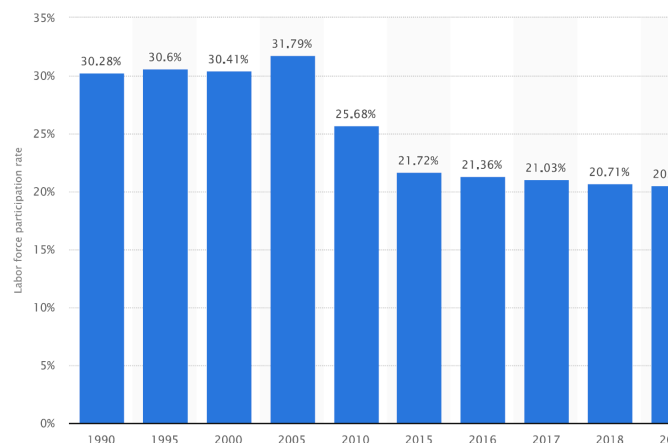
Almost all the respondent organisations allowed a hybrid model of WFH facilities along with physical presence where necessary, to all its employees in addition to provision of special protection gears like masks, gloves, sanitizer, PPE kits, etc., to the ones who were working on field even during the peak of the pandemic. Special insurance coverage in addition to COVID-19 related expenses was also provided by over 40% of the respondent organisations. However, the reason for this gap could have been the availability of resources that varied from organisation to organisation. Vaccination drives for the employees were also conducted by approximately 40% of the respondent organisations, to ensure safety and security of their valuable staff members. Certain other measures for the benefit of the employees were taken by few organisations like conducting webinars on safety protocols related to COVID-19, allowing paid leaves in case an employee or any other family member is infected by the virus. Special measures were also taken by the organisations for their women employees which have been elaborated in the subsequent chapter.

All in all, it was heartening to know that the VS stood by and supported their employees as much as they supported the general population.

Challenges Faced by the Women Workforce in the VS During the Pandemic:

Historically speaking, the economic structures have always been very patriarchal in nature. If one studies the socio-historical analysis, of the ‘public’ and ‘private’ sphere written by Habermas, this becomes even more evident. In ancient Europe, (around the 1800s) the ‘public sphere’ emerged as the realm of commodity exchange and labour which was governed by its own set of rules and laws. This was majorly dominated by the males and the ‘oikos’ or the household was a place for women and slaves.

Even after decades of struggle, the economy is still particularly hard on women.²³ According to World Bank’s report of 2018, India ranked 120 among 131 countries in regard to the participation rates of women in the labour force. The economic contribution of women to the country’s GDP was staggeringly low. It was significantly less than half the global average.

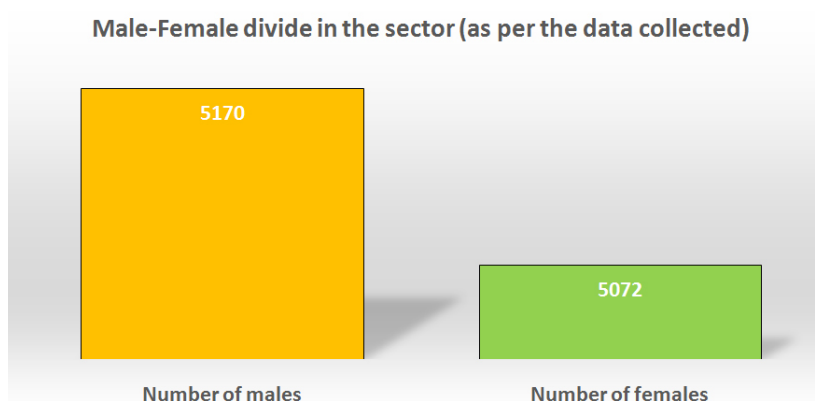


(Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/983020/female-labor-force-participation-rate-india/>)

However, gradually India did make some strides for its women and young girls which were noteworthy, but the pandemic posed a major threat to all those achievements made by women and for women in the workforce.

A recent study conducted by Ashoka University, found that almost 4 out of every 10 women, who were working till 2019, lost their jobs due to the pandemic^(ix). Across industries, when cuts were being made, women were not only losing their jobs but there was also a disproportionate surge in the percentage of women losing their jobs in comparison to their male counterparts. The reason behind it is the deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset of the society we inhabit. Under normal circumstances, there already exists a wage pay gap between the two genders and when a crisis hits, these lesser paid women employees are the first to be laid off by their employers. Employers often tend to devalue and demean the efforts and labour put in by their women employees and often perceive their jobs as “hobbies” and not a necessity for living, solely by the virtue of their sex and the age-old sexual division of labour which perpetuates such a mindset.

The survey conducted by VANI also revealed similar trends. Even though the male-female divide in the sector is almost negligible, (as per the data collected which is just a small sample and not representative of the whole universe they are drawn from), there were certain challenges specific to the women working in the sector.

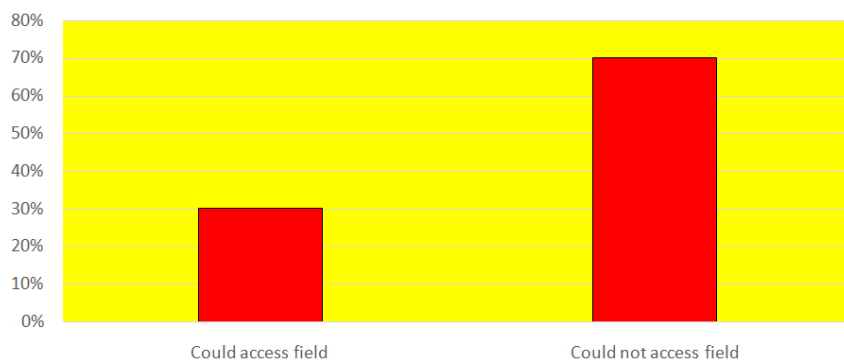


Gradually, even in the face of adversity, just like the frontline workers, the VS contributed immensely to safeguard the vulnerable communities during these trying times. Following all safety protocols and with proper safety gear, several employees and staff from myriad organizations were able to visit their communities on a regular basis. However, as per the data collected, most of them were male employees. Access to the field was much easier for male employees than female employees. This was a specific challenge that most of the women employees faced. This was so because of the commute gap which exists between the two genders in terms of their choices of transportation which is hugely dependent on safety, cost and convenience issues, for women. Much of a woman’s decision regarding her job and career is inadvertently linked to this gender commute gap. The problems faced by women in terms of access to transportation has never been hidden but it has never been addressed much because of the deeply embedded patriarchal structures of our society. The virus has blatantly exposed the existing fissures in our society and has ratcheted them up a notch. The difference was even more glaring for those organizations that work with communities in the remotest

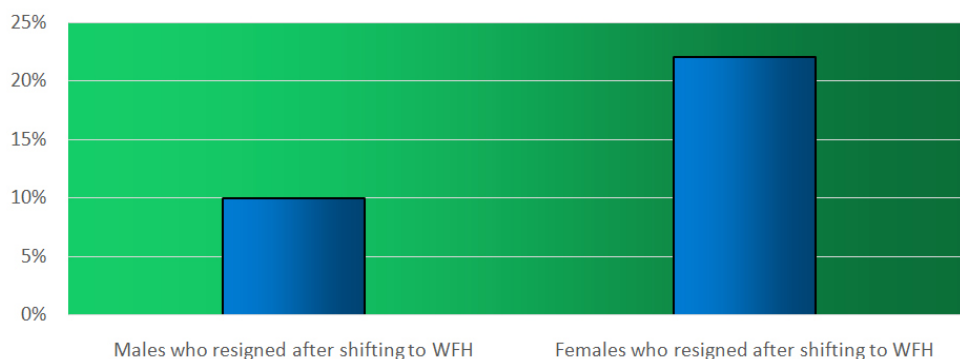
parts of the country. However, some organizations did arrange for adequate transportation and access facilities by securing proper travel permits from their respective state governments during the lockdown. It was observed that in such cases, women working with organizations in the VS, enthusiastically came forward to go visit and provide relief materials to their respective communities. The problem was particularly higher where no such provisions were provided by the organization.

Approximately 30% of the women employees in the VS were unable to participate in field level activities, be it distribution of essential items, creating awareness sessions, counselling, etc. The reasons ranged from inadequate transportation arrangements, increased child care and domestic responsibilities, lack of decision making power regarding her career, etc.

Women employees and their accessibility to the field



At the later stages of the lockdown, many organizations moved to using digital platforms thereby providing WFH facilities for all their employees, including women. This proved to be significantly challenging for women employees. WFH, even though at the apparent levels seems to be flexible, but the harsh realities that women face make it more cumbersome. The lines between work and home got blurred. Women were expected to fulfil both their professional and domestic obligations at work and home respectively. This caused an immense burnout among them. This led to several women quitting their jobs, something which was unimaginable for them prior to the pandemic. Therefore, the WFH facilities provided to women, by several organizations in the sector did not work in their favour. Rather it had a more negative impact.



Out of the VS officials who resigned from their jobs willingly, an extraordinary 70% were women employees. Only 30% of them were male employees. These figures provide significant evidence for the existing gaps between the two genders at workplace.

However, interestingly, as per the data collected, in the VS, there has not been any disproportionate laying off, of women employees due to funding issues or lack of resources. Only in case of dire situations, have employees been laid off but there hasn't been any such discrimination based on gender. In this regard, the VS has fared well in comparison to the rest.

As the COVID-19 crisis continues to affect our lives, women will also continue to shoulder an unreasonable share of the existing burden on them. While there has been some recovery in their lives and livelihood, there is still a long way to go in reaching the pre-COVID-19 conditions; lesser paid jobs will be the first to be affected and lost in case there is another wave of the pandemic in the future. For that part of the women workforce that has been able to retain their jobs, majority will continue to balance competing priorities. For those who would want to save their source of earning, but cannot continue to WFH, will have to join office physically, risking their family's and their own health and making alternate arrangements for their domestic responsibilities to be fulfilled. However, for those who can manage working remotely, they will still have to continue juggling between official work and child care and household chores, struggling to make ends meet.

Conclusion- A Way Forward:

The sector has been exemplary in going the extra mile during crisis. Thereby, it is evident that the response to the pandemic would have been much weaker if the sector hadn't joined hands and come forward to help the people and communities. In order to navigate seamlessly, we as a sector have also been quite swift in adapting to the digital platforms in order to deliver services as and when required. It has also played a key role in sharing authentic messages thereby creating awareness amongst the public regarding the pandemic. From the data collected, it was also evident that the VS played a crucial role in thinking about the recovery and reconstruction of the communities and the society at large.

The pandemic also taught us important lessons and helped inculcate some significant values and skills which can come in handy during future crisis and emergency planning.

As a sector, who has for long fought against the social evils and practices, it is pertinent for us to reflect and focus our attention to the employees and staff who work relentlessly for achieving the goals of it. The pandemic has given us a glimpse of that how everything that we take for granted can rupture overnight before our eyes. It has given us a scope to reassess our priorities in life. In addition, special focus must be given on supporting and retaining the women employees. The VS should also keep all these aspects in mind, while moving forward.

While the roles and responsibilities of women in today's world have expanded significantly since independence, our systems, traditions and mindsets have not necessarily evolved to support them. Since these practices and situations have been prevailing since time immemorial, the solutions towards rehabilitation should not be short-term or COVID-19 focused but must also aim to address these longstanding biases and conditions. This shall help in closing the wage gap, in improving working conditions, and bringing childcare and education systems on the same page as the requirements and restrictions of working parents, so that specifically working

mothers do not have to sacrifice their jobs. Policies and legislations must be enforced to reflect that women have a role, both at home and at workplace and they also contribute significantly to the growing economy.

Policies that could increase women's participation in the sector and overall, address the issues of salary gaps, and making WFH more accessible to women employees, can include policies that incentivization, which may be monetary or otherwise, fixed number of working hours, helping to keep office and home separate, and additional paid leaves for child care related events. It has become a prerequisite to align the education, school, childcare systems with the realities of workforce in India.

Apart from the above-mentioned solutions, fair and equitable compensation for women employees must also be ensured, both at a policy level and at an institutional level. Steps to facilitate this change could include, raising the minimum wage decided by the government and to enforce policies to mandate wage transparency at an organisational level.

As far as, COVID-19 related recovery is concerned, women will have to be supported both at home and at work, in order to bounce back. However, the lack of support to women at both places, cannot be singularly blamed at the pandemic. It was a pre-existing condition which needs to be acknowledged. Returning to the pre-pandemic status must be the objective but not the larger goal. It is time to aim for higher with regard to the status of women in the workforce. The VS must aim to create a sector status that provides equal and fair compensation for both male and female employees, enforces family-friendly policies, and designs an organisational culture that braces female employees for both their roles, be it of a mother, wife or a breadwinner for the family.

The pandemic has forced everyone to think the world anew. So, the onus is on the VS now, to break away from the shackles of the old traditional ways and rethink or rather re-imagine the sector's future, if it wants to survive.

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About Voluntary Action Network India (VANI)

VANI is a national network of Indian Voluntary Development Organisations (VDOs). Currently VANI has 624 members with an outreach to around 10,000 VDOs across India. The membership of VANI ranges from grass roots to the national organizations. The members work on a range of priority development issues of the government including education, health, nutrition, integrated child development, livelihood, skill development, environment, natural resource management, climate change, water and sanitation, emergency response and preparedness, agriculture, poverty and so on, in some of the most remote areas of the country. In the year 2017-18 our network collectively reached out to over 32 million people belonging to vulnerable and marginalized groups including children, disabled people, women, elderly, farmers, dalit, tribals, disaster survivors, unemployed, youth, LGBT, sex workers etc. VANI through its efforts and strategies aims to build a strong civil society sector not only at national but regional and local level as well.

VANI was set up with the mission to promote voluntarism, create space for the sector by fostering value based voluntary action. VANI's interventions are focused to strengthen the external and internal enabling environment. To ensure the external enabling environment, VANI conducts evidence-based advocacy which includes regulatory frameworks and resource generation. In order to achieve this VANI works with the government, private sector, bilateral, multilaterals and other stakeholders. For strengthening the internal enabling environment, VANI works towards building resilience and promoting accountability, transparency and compliance through the interactive educational events and information dissemination. VANI strives to become a resource centre by conducting evidence-based research; publishing studies, articles and reports not only at state level but national and global level as well.



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