

# Lockdowns and Life-after: Impact of Covid-19 on Youth Working in the Shopping Malls of Bengaluru City

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**KANAJA**

*Youth Research Cell*

# Acknowledgements

**Research Consolidation and Writing :** *Shraddha N.V. Sharma*

**Editing and Finalisation:** *Dr. Savitha Suresh Babu, Charumathi Mohan*

**Field Research and Analysis:** *Dr. Shalini. R, Apoorva, Kamakshi N, Lata, Kiran Kumar*

**Research Guidance and Inputs:** *Anita Ratnam, Poornima Kumar*

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# 1. Introduction: Situating the Study

25 year old Loskesh's M.A degree was half done, when the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown changed the course of his life. With poor internet connectivity, and unclear online classes, he failed his exams, and could not complete the degree. Given the financial distress in his family at the time, he was forced to take up work. A part-time job at a shopping mall he had during his college education now became his full time job- a necessity to tide over the family crisis. And yet, Loskesh was well aware that the prospects for a secure future or long-term financial viability were not on the cards in this job.

One of the participants in this study, Loskesh, is not alone. The urban retail sector offers a livelihood possibility to many young people with limited educational qualifications. However, the job comes with its own set of precarious conditions, and limitations to growth. Understanding the possibilities and negotiations of urban retail workers, especially in the peculiarities of the post-pandemic world, is the focus of this study. Through in-depth interviews with young workers in different shopping malls of Bengaluru, this report elaborates on how already insecure working conditions grew more precarious with the pandemic.

The growth of India's service sector, bypassing manufacturing, is often remarked upon. The retail sector is recognised as a significant contributor to this growth; what goes unremarked often is the large number of young people employed by the sector. Be it in garment retail outlets, food and drug stores or cosmetic outlets, seeing young women and men eke out a livelihood, in our cities, has become a common sight. Be it Decathlon, D-Mart or Metro, young women and men spend long days behind cash registers, showing goods to consumers

or organising products in counters and shelves. What led them to these jobs? What do these jobs offer them? How did the pandemic, and the subsequent lockdowns impact their jobs and lives? These questions animate this report. Specifically, through in-depth interviews with young people working in different shopping malls of Bengaluru city, this report draws out a contextualised picture of the lives, and livelihoods of retail workers.

Non viability of agriculture and distress migration often push rural youth to migrate to urban centres. Cities as spaces that promote autonomy and agency also hold an aspirational pull for youngsters. For these youth, finding meaningful livelihoods at a time of shrinking public sector opportunities, and limited private sector employment, that too with limited educational qualifications remains a challenge. In this context, organised retail outlets that have a minimal entry requirement (education up to class 10), sometimes offering training programs in communication and soft-skills, hold an appeal. Beyond the glamour of the urban retail experience, however, the nature of work in this sector remains highly unstable.

Although a formal sector, there is rapid informalisation within the retail sector. Policies of hire or fire, easy replaceability of employees and limited possibilities for collective action by workers within retail outlets, means that youth in retail remain a highly vulnerable workforce. As with other workers, their vulnerabilities were further compounded in the extended lockdowns that followed the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. What does it mean to be a youth worker in the retail sector, in such precarious times? How do they understand their work and workplace? What are their prospects for socio-economic mobility, and career progression? How have notions of labour, leisure and love shaped up for them? This report engages with these questions, contextualising them within the peculiarities of corona-times.

Covid-19 pandemic has brought a seismic shift to work, livelihoods and life in general. We have witnessed starvation deaths, mounting care work, social exclusion, increased loss of

control over time and body, and increased domestic violence.. Across the world, the economic crisis has been considered the worst since the Second World War. This downturn has had significant negative implications to young people according to a co-published report by the Asian Development Bank and the International Labour organisation: in India, around 59% of the young workers aged 15-24 years lost employment during or after the lockdown, compared to 40% of those between 25-34 years and 35% of those between 35-44 years, who were more likely to retain their jobs or find new ones owing to their years of experience. (Asian Development Bank [ADB] and International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2020; Abraham, R., et.al, 2020; Jalan, G., 2020). Given the concentration of young people in urban retail, the impact of the pandemic on this section demands attention.

### **1.1. Youth in Urban Retail**

Organised retail, despite constituting five percent of the total retail sector, perhaps is the largest employer of urban youth in India (Choudhury, 2014). Labour intensive as the sector is, it has minimal entry requirements- a high school education, and basic communication and soft skills, that can be further enhanced by the hiring organisation. These minimal requirements along with the non-viability of agriculture, distress migration, increasing non-farm diversification, aspirations of mobility, and limited industrialization have attracted youth to the organised retail sector (Shabnam and Paul, 2008, Aayog, N. I. T. I., 2017 and Inani, 2021). The sector also prefers to hire younger people because they are believed to be easily trainable, malleable and moulded to the needs of the job (Gooptu, 2009). Youthhood is a period of multiple transitions – from education to paid work; from childhood to adult life where one is faced with increasing responsibilities and societal expectations around marriage; leaving home and possibly setting up a new home (Wyn and White, 1997). Too often youth are perceived as either lacking in knowledge and skills, or as resources and assets who can

achieve economic developmental outcomes. Both perspectives lead only to training and skill development, rather than look at youth as people with dreams, aspirations and abilities of their own (Mishra, 2014). This period of transitions, seen in the context of employers perceiving them as easily malleable, demands special focus as the needs of the industry may be prioritised at the cost of the specific needs of the population.

Further, looking at retail itself, certain studies have focused specifically on labour and shopping malls, and what malls have come to represent. Scholars including Srivastava (2014), Chandrasekhar and Ghosh (2007) document how, in the wake of economic liberalisation by the Indian government in the early 1990s, malls represent a shift in the practices of consumption and leisure, producing new narratives of individual and collective transformations (Mathur, 2010). Shopping malls have been a central part of the changing economies of land since the 1990's – whether in the city, the margins of the city, or the village (Srivastava, 2014). These factors and others make the experience of working in malls distinct from other organised retail that is located in independent stores or older commercial complexes.

Work within the architectural and symbolic spaces of malls takes on particular textures. For instance, Bardalai (2021) shows that, in the context of Delhi malls, retail workers claim a new class identity through their professions, distinct from informal and manual labour, or from those who are traditionally seen as the working class. While there is always a stigma attached to public manual work that is often associated with caste (John, 2013), work in retail may not seem as vulnerable to stigma. However, Bardalai (2021) documents how retail workers felt demeaned in their jobs; humiliated and disrespected by customers and managers, they felt their jobs did not allow them to entirely transcend their class positions. Nevertheless, working in malls may signify a particular kind of 'status' as Baas and Cayla (2017) argue in the case of coffee chains. Seen as 'new services' in the Indian market, these jobs offer a new kind of



social relationship between service workers and their customers. Their study presents a critical perspective on the resilience of social hierarchies even as young workers from lower middle classes find the opportunity to interact and learn from English-speaking upper middle-class customers. Our study, while concerned with such enduring social hierarchies, foregrounds the lives of the retail workers, and their interaction with their employers/management. Building on this dynamic, we find in our study that different social identities have different impacts on the ways in which workers are perceived, and how they are able to negotiate within workplaces.

Further, Bardalai (2019) complicates the way women from Northeast India working in high-end retail stores in the malls of Delhi and Gurgaon straddle discourses of modernity and marginality. Seen by the management as “modern” and “global”, reflective of the “aesthetic sensibilities” of the brands they are hired under, these women’s bodies are valued by recruiters. At the same time, these women are stereotyped racially and sexually on the streets, labelled as promiscuous and provocatively dressed. Narratives in our study echo these ideas and further probe the question of identity with respect to women employees from Northeast India and remote parts of the country, even within the confines of the mall, among their peers and the management.

## **1.2. Pandemic and increased precarity**

In the context of the pandemic, the latest World Economic Outlook report of IMF has opined that retail, over represented by young people, is one the worst hit sectors along with wholesale trade, accommodation, hospitality, food and tourism industry, subjecting women, youth and low skilled workers to huge loss (Lee et.al., 2020).

Addressed as lockdown generation by the IMF, due to forced halt in education and training, young people are finding it increasingly difficult to find work, affecting their future prospects acutely (ADB and ILO, 2020)

The pandemic comes at a particular juncture in the longer socio-cultural and economic history of shopping malls that has been documented by different authors. Prasad-Aleyamma (2021), for instance, argues that the pandemic is a specific moment that separates production not into that of services and goods, but into touch-based and tech-based, a “new iteration of the difference between physical and mental labour”. The logic of this division is based not just on whether workers might get infected, but “on whom they might infect”. In the USA, 5.5 million chefs, waiters and cashiers lost jobs. These jobs, she suggests, held the capacity to “infect anybody through touch and proximity, including the bourgeoisie”, and therefore had a higher risk profile than say factory work [where in some units, the working classes were expected to continue work in close proximity to one another, while the managerial class could work-from-home]. In India, where the graded hierarchy of caste has stigmatised ‘touch’ of the marginalised for millenia, the response to the pandemic oftentimes meant “servitude for lower castes, social distancing for the upper... resurrecting the worst excesses of its casteist past” (Choudhury and Aga, 2020).

The pandemic exacerbated already existing inequalities within a neoliberal economic order, punctuated by social divides of caste and religion. In this context, studies to understand retail workers – a young aspiring workforce – are pertinent, to both understand the existing situation and create a discourse that can challenge the new workings of neoliberal economies alongside older societal structures in a post pandemic world. The physical and mental health impact on these workers as they were faced with the contagion, failing healthcare systems, job loss and family pressures needs to be documented with empathy and with close attention

to the differences in their experiences. The current study is an attempt at such documentation, within the specific context of youth retail workers in select shopping malls of Bengaluru.

### **1.3. Objectives and Research questions**

Our study was aimed at providing an in-depth understanding of a select group of retail workers in Bengaluru. Understanding their journey into retail work, and how the pandemic changed the circumstances of their work and lives, was the overarching objective. With this in mind, our specific research questions were as follows:

1. How has COVID-19 impacted the working lives of organised retail workers in malls between ages of 18 and 30 in Bengaluru?
  - 1.1. What was the nature of employment pre-corona (how were they recruited, what was the salary, working hours, benefits, access to loans)? How did these change after covid-19?
  - 1.2 What forms of institutionalised support could be accessed during the pandemic?
2. How has covid 19 impacted the health and wellbeing of retail workers?
3. How has it impacted their family lives?
  - 3.1 Did they have to return to their hometowns/villages?
  - 3.2. Were there greater pressures to marry? Did they marry?
  - 3.3 What impact did the pandemic have on their romantic relationships?

### **1.4. Methodology**

The research is qualitative in nature and involves analysis of narratives of research participants. In-depth interviews were conducted with participants through a sampling process that included purposive, convenience as well as snowball methods.

Purposive sampling involved contacting workers in retail through the existing networks of the research team. The young women who are part of the team are from a milieu where many peers work in the retail sector.

The convenience method involved cold calls at food and trade retail outlets in malls, approaching young workers with the request to participate in our research. The method had the potential to help us reach diverse respondents, outside of our networks. However, it had its shortcomings as the setting was hardly ideal to speak freely about their own issues. With a tight schedule and high targets set for the day, workers did not have the time for researchers to engage with them at length.

### **1.5. Demographic details of respondents**

We included a total of 30 participants in the study, 16 of whom are women and 14 are men. The participants live and work in different parts of the city and were selected largely through convenience sampling by the research team approaching them at their workplace. In this section, we dwell on the demographics of the participants, including descriptions of their age, gender, caste, class and religion as well as their marital status and educational qualification. These descriptions help in understanding their varying contexts and in situating our study on the effects of the pandemic, within the larger canvas of their everyday lives.

The table below gives a broad idea of the age group and marital status of the 30 participants. Further, it indicates their caste category. The study intended to gauge the social location of the retail employees in the malls of Bangalore by looking into specific castes and the caste histories in the region. However, the participants only mentioned the caste-category or the governmental category that they were aware of and were wary of discussing caste further. This makes it difficult to break down the hierarchical difference within caste categories, especially that of the large group of OBC castes, and how the experiences of those from the

most politically underrepresented castes may be different from others in retail. This is an aspect that needs further attention.

All the names of the participants of the study have been changed to protect their identity.

Sl. No.	Name	Age	Caste Category	Marital Status
1	Naina	24	SC	Single
2	Shaila	25	OBC	Married
3	Parimala	36	OBC	Married
4	Arun	22	SC	Single
5	Suresh	26	OBC	Single
6	Shrija	26	OBC	Single
7	Mohan	19	SC	Single
8	Rohan	29	SC	Single
9	Prakash	23	OBC	Single
10	Pallavi	27	OBC	Single
11	Dileep	27	ST	Single
12	Nithin	27	SC	Married
13	Nicole	22	SC	Single
14	Sathish	24	ST	Single
15	Vivek	25	OBC	Single
16	Kumuda	19	SC	Single
17	Meera	23	SC	Single
18	Safina	24	OBC	Single
19	Zahira	19	OBC	Single
20	Gopal	23	OBC	Single
21	Prasad	23	SC	Single

22	Sarini	20	SC	Single
23	Shruthi	20	SC	Single
24	Sunayana	24	ST	Married
25	Shreya	29	OBC	Married
26	Preethi	27	OBC	Married
27	Deepti	26	OBC	Single
28	Divya	23	SC	Single
29	Umesh	28	SC	Single
30	Loskesh	25	OBC	Single

The career path drawn out for these young people, who are starting out with paid work, is a remarkably limited one. The extent of informalisation in the supposedly organised sector and its consequences in the middle of a public health crisis are discussed further in subsequent chapters.

While a majority of them are Hindu, one participant is Christian, and two are Muslim. These categories must be qualified by caste categories and class statuses to understand the social circumstances in which they work. The respondents of this study all belong to Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe categories. Even with convenience sampling and cold call approach at malls, this pattern among respondents makes it evident that the low-paying jobs of the retail economy are constituted of people largely from historically marginalised communities. As has been established, many of the roles in retail outlets including in malls do not require previous work experience or higher educational qualifications. For participants who have completed their 10th standard and obtained the Secondary School Leaving Certificate<sup>1</sup>, retail has been an avenue to earn a steady, albeit low,

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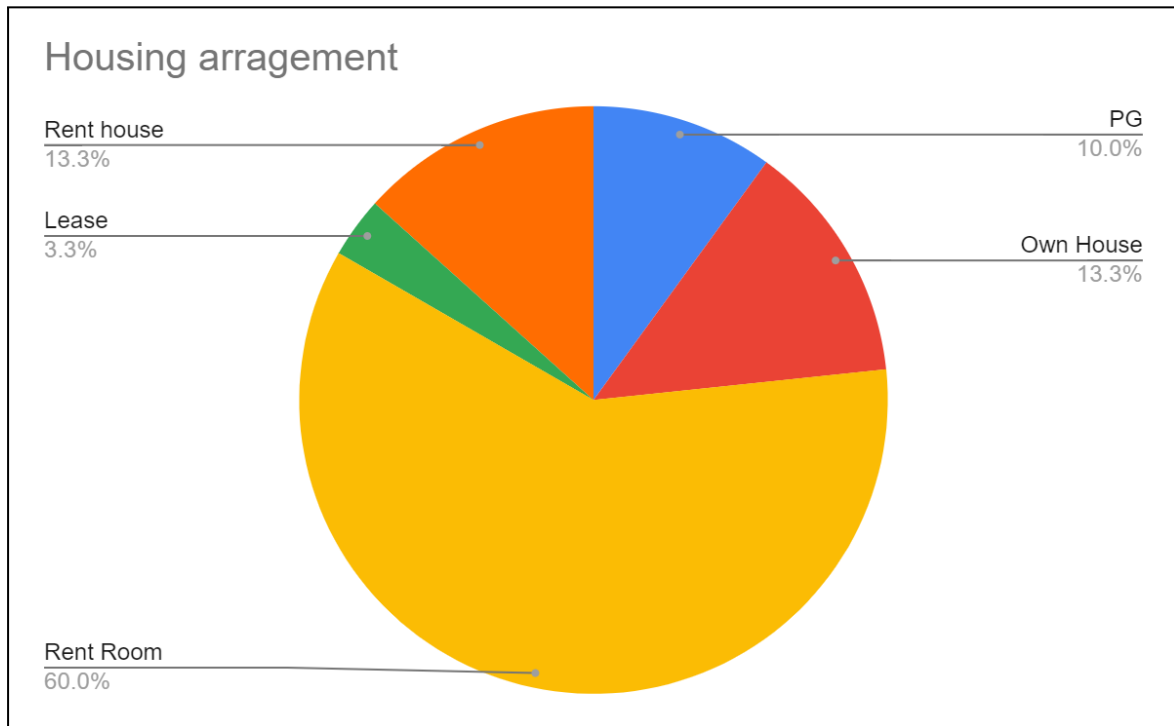
<sup>1</sup> SSLC is the certification obtained by a student on completion of an examination at the end of study at the secondary schooling level in India

income in the city. Loskesh, who we met at the beginning of this report said about choosing to work full-time in retail after the pandemic: “As classes and assessments were conducted online, I could not perform well in the M.A. examinations. After graduating I had no relevant work experience due to the lockdown. So, I could not apply for a position that is suitable for my qualification.” Although working in the mall was only a means of supporting his own studies before the pandemic, he was expected to contribute to the household income as his family was facing financial difficulties at the time.

For Shaila, who also holds a masters in arts, family responsibilities had started well before the pandemic. “My father is unemployed and so is my brother. They really don’t care about the family. So, I have to repay the loans taken for my sister’s wedding,” she shared. As the position of a cook at the fast food joint in a mall did not require prior experience, it was ideal to ensure an immediate salary, even if it was calculated as 48 rupees per hour of work, amounting to 12,500 rupees a month.

Nearly all the participants live in rented houses, rooms, or Paying Guest (PG) arrangements in the city. Fig. 1. shows the distribution of housing arrangements among the participants of the study. While many of the workers we spoke to hail from other districts in Karnataka, there were even those who have migrated from eastern and north eastern states of India. As we will see in subsequent chapters, the lockdown made accessing even the most basic needs, including paying rent, strenuous.

Figure. 1.



Participants, whose educational qualifications range between SSLC and post graduation are paid between a dismal 7,000 rupees a month to 21,000 rupees, but the pay scale has little to do with qualification. Participants who have completed M.A. are underemployed as sales executives, not even given the opportunity of rising to the level of managers. As a senior sales executive, it is possible to earn a decent income but as the employees take up part-time sales executive jobs due to their circumstances, they have little chance for a dignified livelihood that entails social security in the form of Employee Provident Fund (EPF)<sup>2</sup>, Employee State Insurance Scheme (ESI)<sup>3</sup> and policies ensuring paid leave.

<sup>2</sup> PF or EPF refers to Employee's Provident Fund Organisation under which

<sup>3</sup> Employee's State Insurance scheme is a type of social security scheme for employees in the organised sector. The employees registered under the scheme are entitled to medical treatment for themselves and their dependents, unemployment cash benefit in certain contingencies and maternity benefit in case of women employees

<https://www.esic.nic.in/information-benefits>



In the following three chapters, we will examine questions around participants' experiences at the workplace, including those related to the nature of work before and after the pandemic outbreak, their health and well-being as employees in retail outlets in malls, as well as their relationship with their families and romantic partners. These experiences, common and unique, lead us to drawing a larger picture of the reality of working in retail today.

### **1.5. Limitations**

Since the research is qualitative in nature, it dwells on particular experiences of respondents and the findings do not necessarily represent the reality of all retail workers. However, the analysis of the context within which these experiences take place, provides insight into the larger political economy within which the youth are working. Within retail, this project focuses on experiences of workers only in outlets inside malls. Hence, a broader perspective on the retail sector itself is outside of the project's scope.

The site of the research is Bangalore city. Specific geographies do impact labour in specific ways, however, it remains outside the scope of the study to explore how specific histories of Bengaluru have impacted retail or the experiences of youth. This is an aspect that needs to be explored in more detail in further research.

Another aspect left unexplored in this project is the experiences of youth in middle management roles in malls. These workers too have their own unique set of issues to grapple with and need more focused analysis.

### **1.6 Summarising the study**

In the first chapter we introduce the landscape of retail work, paying close attention to scholarship on organised retail in malls in India. We also look into the economic slowdown that followed the COVID-19 outbreak, and how it affected labour markets and the youth in

the country. Further, it delves into demographic descriptions with respect to the participants, and details the methodological tools employed in the qualitative study.

With this background, the second chapter proceeds to explore the nature of employment of the participants before the pandemic, during the lockdown period in the first wave and the time that followed. Interviews with retail workers were conducted between September and November 2021, by different field workers. We have found that the various measures taken by the government to curtail the spread of the virus and those taken by private employers in ensuring minimal losses have adversely affected the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of workers in retail stores in malls. However, our study points out that the pandemic is only a juncture in the longer history of organised retail when the adverse conditions of workers has been starkly visible.

When informalisation has come to stay in organised retail, assisted by changing legislation that favours employers, any attempt by workers to negotiate for a dignified livelihood is easily quelled. As we have seen in the different narratives in this study, the retail sector, unlike manual and unorganised work, has offered interesting avenues towards respectability and a steady income for those transitioning from education to paid work. However, a dignified livelihood seems to be far from reach in this sector too, restricting social mobility especially in times of crisis such as the COVID 19 pandemic. A dignified livelihood entails decent working conditions including time to rest and eat, washroom facility, paid leave, grievance redressal mechanisms especially for workers marginalised due to caste, gender, sexuality and other axes of power. It also includes fair wages and social security in order to ensure essential needs like education and protection against ill health. Our study has focused on these aspects of the participants' work and has elaborated on how the pandemic came to worsen working conditions with salary cuts and lay-offs. We also unpack some of the coping mechanisms the participants employed through the distressing time.

The narratives clearly show that several factors such as gender, caste, region, fluency of the regional language as well as English affect the value placed on the employer, and therefore, those disadvantaged by these factors face severe exploitation at an institutional level. However, a notion of personal merit prevails among workers in which their social identities or systemic oppression are disregarded and workers feel the need to prove their efficiency.

We also specifically look at issues of gender based and sexual harassment at the workplace and the negotiations women employees have to make at the workplace and with their family and community in order to sustain themselves in the workforce and gain economic independence, even as they support their families. It is clear that companies are failing to sensitise those in managerial positions in retail outlets in how they supervise sales executives and others in customer facing roles, particularly those whose bodies are already racialised and sexualised in the public sphere due to their linguistic and ethnic identities. Workers' basic needs such as rest, access to sanitation, grievance redressal and social security need to be ensured by the state, and this calls for focused work to address the gaps that the new labour codes have brought (Mohan et al., 2021) in fulfilling workers rights.

In the third chapter, we analyse issues related to the health and wellbeing of participants, with the moment of the pandemic representing larger patterns in their work life. The narratives demonstrate how workers make daily compromises in nutrition and rest at the workplace, leading to long term health concerns. Women in particular face mental and physical distress due to prevailing patriarchal organisational structures. Companies largely chose to lay-off retail workers or slashed salaries during the lockdown period rather than take initiative to provide ration and healthcare to their employees. The precarity that surrounded the pandemic led to heightened mental distress, adding to the usual pressures of discipline and meeting targets at the workplace. The study shows that these circumstances have affected the young

workers' aspirations and ambition for their future, which can only be protected through material changes in the sector.

In the fourth chapter we dwell on how the pandemic affected young retail workers' relationships with their families and romantic partners. Although participants face societal pressure to marry young, the vulnerable economic conditions of the family implies that they are expected to support the household, especially through a crisis such as the pandemic. This commitment towards their families also colours their view of love and romantic partnership with guilt. Participants who are single as well as those who are married, although had different experiences in the pandemic, strongly felt a lack of privacy. The study has tried to bring attention to these significant aspects of workers' lives that go largely unaddressed in studies about labour even when personal lives are intertwined with work lives.

## 2. Work challenges: pandemic and after

With the backgrounds of the participants providing a context, this chapter analyses the nature of their work and working conditions before the pandemic set in and the changes they experienced after the outbreak. This is an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of their motivations behind joining retail work in malls, and through that their aspirations from work or a career and to understand whether retail has the potential to fulfil those aspirations.

### **2.1. Nature of work before the pandemic: Increasing casualisation and reduced benefits**

As discussed earlier, large retailers present young people the possibility of entering paid work with minimal educational qualification. However, for our participants, entering the sector seems to be more due to push factors t

han pull factors. It is noteworthy that the participants of the study have found a route out of dire poverty through various kinds of store operations in retail. At the same time, the economic instability at home due to under and unemployment of older family members, and non-viability of agriculture and non-agricultural work in rural areas have driven them to choose a job which they are aware has little scope for growth. These findings are in line with literature that has established that distress migration is one of the main reasons driving youth towards organised retail (Shabnam and Paul, 2008).

While career growth is limited, participants expressed how the income was far better before the pandemic than after. “There was not much pressure at work before the pandemic. I got a decent salary then and incentives too” said 29 year old Rohan, who was unable to pass 2nd PUC (pre university college or class 12<sup>th</sup>) but now works as a senior sales executive in a specialty store in a mall. Importantly, Rohan’s Cost To Company is 17,000 rupees and

includes ESI and PF. He also informed the research team member that he is given a one hour lunch break and a half hour tea break. His colleague Shrija, who has completed B.A. also has similar benefits and earns 21,000 rupees including incentives. Another participant, Prakash who is 23 years old, also reported having the benefits of ESI and PF. “I was able to buy a personal vehicle with my salary, and was able to pay EMI on time” he added.

These instances may paint a good picture of the security that an employment career in retail can grant. However, the same participants who spoke of the rare ESI and PF, and others in the study who did not avail even that, reported working up to 10 hours or more in contracts that recognize them as just part time employees. This violation of labour law that does not fix the number of working hours is not a sudden effect of the pandemic. Even in the supposed normalcy of life before the pandemic, casualisation of work had been rampant for our participants. This means that they are not recognized as permanent or even full-time employees. Their employment is bound by short term and part-time contracts. As has been established earlier, this kind of informalisation of the workforce due to the policies of large retailers has been underway well before the crisis created by the COVID 19 pandemic (Gooptu 2009, Upadhya and RoyChowdhury 2020, Rao 2015, Gaskell 2021).

It is also common that any attempt at unionising is dampened by employers. Due to these reasons and without the economic or social capital to transcend into entrepreneurial spheres in the globalised economy, the newly educated from historically marginalised castes remain in the unorganised service sector that is growing at a fast rate (Shepherd, 2019).

Besides institutionalised benefits or the lack of them, we asked our participants about the everyday working conditions they dealt with. To this, Rohan, who spoke of less pressure prior to the pandemic, added: “They assign positions arbitrarily. They don’t consider the years of experience I have so it’s difficult to continue in this field.” Other participants like

Prakash added that any argument with customers would land him in trouble. This fear of crossing the line has evidently increased after the pandemic as we will see in the next section. The extra working hours without pay, unrealistic targets, and fear of losing the job, all make the lives of youth like Rohan, Shrija and Prakash precarious.

These adverse working conditions affect women more. In a distressing finding, a participant, Meera, shared that the working hours in a part-time position go up to 14 hours a day for an income of a mere 12,000 rupees. “I am afraid to go back home so late in the night but the owner (employer) does not understand. I have no savings even after working so hard because I have to pay rent at the PG and also send money back home,” said Meera who is from a Scheduled Caste from a north eastern state. Sunayana, a respondent who comes from a district in north Karnataka, spoke of how these exploitative working hours are even more agonising when women are on their period as there is no specific room for women to rest in the mall. “We have one day off in the week and no other holidays. We may get one or two days of medical leave,” said Bhavana who is currently pursuing her M.A. Her part-time job involves work from 9am to 4:30pm. The concept of medical leave, however, was unknown to nearly all those who participated in the study.

## **2.2. The many sides of gender-based and sexual harassment at the workplace**

Women in the study spoke of how gender based or sexual harassment is commonplace in their field of work. Afraid that they are easily replaceable in the job that requires no special training, women tend to go about their work without raising their voice against such normalised harassment.

Respondents shared how they are worse off than their male counterparts in many respects including lower pay for the same work, and the threat to safety due to longer working hours

and lack of travel facilities even in late hours when public transport is sparse. This form of institutionalised patriarchy is evident in respondents' narratives. For instance, Sunayana said:

*“From a psychological point of view, there is no respect for women, especially if we are not married. You can see this as we work more but the salary is less. From a physical point of view, there is no mercy for the effort we put in. We have to work without rest even on our period”.*

While sexual harassment must be addressed separately, it cannot be removed from this kind of everyday sexism, and gender based discrimination, and insensitivity that the space of retail is rife with. A careful understanding of these experiences of women is necessary in order to create enabling mechanisms for women workers in retail stores in malls.

Besides the lack of a conducive atmosphere to retain women in the sector, certain regulations arise from a strict adherence to gender norms and behaviour. Grooming, for instance, is an aspect that is highly stressed upon by employers in the sector. Both men and women are expected to keep themselves exceptionally presentable to customers. This means that men are restricted from growing their hair long and are expected to be clean shaven at all times. The narratives in the study suggest that women, especially those in departmental stores, are expected to wear ‘appropriate’ make-up and cannot be found without it on the shop floor. Often this includes wearing high heeled footwear while standing all day. “It is really painful but they insist on it, especially for short people. This can create many complications in the future, especially during pregnancy,” said Safina, one of the participants. Further, regarding the stipulated uniform, she said:

*“There is added pressure being a Muslim woman working in retail because we are not supposed to wear burka or dupatta (veil). We must wear only t-shirts*



*and jeans. So I get judged (by the community) for not wearing a burka at all times” (Safina, Bangalore).*

Sunayana spoke from her experience on how physical appearance plays a role in hiring too. “When they appoint or choose people for work in the mall, they also look at body skin colour, language, whether you are thin or fat, and your family details,” she said. These discriminatory hiring practices and regulations speak volumes of the objectification of women’s bodies and the subtle sexualisation occurring in retail in general. The implications of this are that women spend an immense amount of time and energy negotiating with their families and communities to even enter the public realm of work and sustain themselves in the sector. The burka and other symbols of any minority religion bear stronger religious connotations than do those of a majority religion which come to be seen as cultural rather than religious. In Safina’s case, there seems to be an added responsibility of bearing the honour of the community while straddling modernity, something that the Hindu women participants did not share experiencing intensely.

### **2.2.1. Harassment towards racialised bodies and other linguistic identities**

While women from Karnataka are subjected to harassment on account of their gender, we found that the nature of exploitation faced by Meera or Nicole, participants who have migrated from North Eastern states, are due to their racialised identity. Not only are instances of sexual harassment more prevalent among these participants, the impunity shown to perpetrators at the workplace in these cases is much more blatant, as seen from their narratives:

*“There is a perception that North East girls are ready for anything. The owner has touched me and held me in a sexual manner. I don’t want it but I keep*

*quiet because they can throw me out of the job. There is a lot of competition for this work, so I'm afraid of losing my job. So, I just do my work in silence"*

(Nicole, 22, Bangalore).

The replaceability of retail workers in malls is compounded by the fact that these women have no strong support system in the city of their work. Further, racism manifests in the form of mockery at their language and harassment for their lack of knowledge of Kannada. Exploitative work hours due to these migrant women's lack of negotiating power creates a further hostile and unsafe environment as we see in another narrative:

*"Work means work where there is no humanity. I just sacrifice myself to the owner or customer while at work... They wish to touch me, hold me, and work the night shift. Sometimes I work from 9am to 11:30 pm. Who knows what can happen to me at such times. I am afraid of walking home at night in that hour. But the owner does not understand my pain and fear,"* (Meera, 23, Bangalore).

Here, it is clearly not only the woman's gender but her racialized body that is being sexualised (Bora, 2010). The impunity of the employers is not only owing to the vulnerable position of a migrant who does not understand the regional language and is geographically distanced from her family and other support systems, but an assumption of her "ready-ness" to be an object of sexual satisfaction.

Other migrant women from remote parts of the country face similar unwarranted sexual advances on a daily basis. For instance, Naina, a 24 year old woman from a scheduled caste background, said: "They touch my private parts and I cannot talk about what is happening with me because then they will target me further." These experiences of sexual harassment are directly linked with multiple structures of power. Analysing sexual harassment with the lens of gender alone erases the experiences of those who are disadvantaged by the

intersecting (Crenshaw, 1989) and simultaneously constricting (Paik, 2018) structures of caste, ethnicity and class.

There is an urgent need to address sexual harassment at the workplace in the context of retail work in malls, where employees come from diverse regional and linguistic backgrounds, with more focused attention on how these different axes of identity affect women's lives.

### **2.3. Strained economic conditions due to the lockdown**

The retail workers who participated in our study had to stay out of work in the early months of the lockdown, following the initial spread of the coronavirus. Those whose families reside outside of Bangalore had to leave the city for several weeks. Even those who lived here, spent their days without any source of income, biding their time until they would be called back to work. As some food establishments were still operating, offering home-deliveries, a few workers spoke about their experiences of working through the uncertain times, with little knowledge about the virus and its spread. This section brings together narratives describing the working conditions, changes in remuneration and their impact in the aftermath of the outbreak.

Critical work on the changing labour laws in the country have pointed out the absence of social security provisions in the new legislation. While providing greater flexibility to employers to hire and fire workers, the new labour codes weaken the rights of the working class (Mohan et al., 2021). In the context of the implementation of these laws, our study sought to understand the economic impact that the lockdown had on retail workers. We were also interested in the perception that the workers have about their economic needs, weekly rest, occupational safety and social security, all of which are considered as universal human rights as they assure a secure, healthy and decent standard of living for every individual (ILO, 2017).

While some companies did not sack their employees and continued paying reduced salaries through work-from-home (WFH) options during the lockdown, other companies completely ceased paying their store staff and rehired a few of them when the lockdown was lifted. Women like Nicole and Naina were left with no option but to return to their hometowns and take up domestic work to be able to afford food and medicines for their families. “It was very humiliating and embarrassing for me to go home without any savings,” said Nicole, who managed to earn a meagre 500 rupees a week as a domestic labourer in her hometown.

Sathish, who has an ITI training and was left with no work at hand in the city, could not find any transport back to his village in time and only managed to reach home when a local MLA offered him and his companions a ride for 200 rupees. “Thankfully there was some agricultural work that I could do in the village as there was enough irrigation at the time,” he said.

Other workers like Shrija were given WFH during the initial lockdown and paid 50% of their stipulated salary. However, on returning to work, they faced salary cuts even if the working hours remained as before. Shrija explained:

*“When the lockdown eased up and our delivery service began, they began to cut 10% of my salary each time. As my mother sells flowers for a living and I am the only other earning member, it has become very difficult for us to manage the household,”* (Shrija, 26, Bangalore).

Workers whose families contracted the virus were in a worse state as they had no savings to speak of. 19 year old Mohan, who belongs to an OBC community in Karnataka and works in the outer periphery of the city, said: “I have made no loans and my payment includes ESI and PF. There is some security in the job. But during the lockdown, my family was down with COVID and it became difficult to buy food and medicines.” Interestingly, one of the youngest

participants in the study, Mohan, said he had no plans of changing jobs and had nothing to share in terms of his expectations from the job or improvements in working conditions. He is one among many of his peers who seemed to not consider their needs as rights.

### **2.3.1. Varied forms of increased exploitation in the “unlockdown”**

As the government of India announced its staggered opening up of services and permitted retail outlets to open to the public, employers called their staff back to work in the malls whose footfalls were yet to rise substantially. This staggered opening up to ensure containment of the virus is referred to as “unlockdown levels”. As part of the study, participants reflected on the kind of changes that occurred in their remuneration and the safety measures taken by the employers (or the lack thereof).

With continued cuts in salaries on returning to work in the malls, participants faced difficulties with expenditure other than the most basic and immediate needs of family members. 26 year old Suresh who is not married and has four elder sisters said:

*“There was pressure from my family on my sister to get married. We thought there won’t be a lot of expenditure if we have the wedding in the lockdown and went ahead but it still cost us a lot. Now I’m not able to repay the loans I made for her wedding because I was receiving only 50% of my salary during the lockdown and couldn’t save. The 3500-4000 rupees incentive we used to receive has been reduced to 1500-2000 rupees. We can’t argue because they were paying us even during the lockdown. We didn’t receive our annual bonus this year even though work pressure has increased.”*

Prakash, who has completed SSLC and had spoken of being able to buy a motorbike on EMI for daily commute said about the unlockdown: “I couldn’t pay the house rent and the EMI I

had taken. It was difficult to even afford food during the lockdown and I was constantly anxious that they would fire me.” In terms of the nature of work immediately after the unlockdown, he added:

*“Customers didn’t come as they used to earlier. It was very difficult to reach sales targets. We had to use new strategies to ensure sales when customers entered the store. There was a lot of pressure from the manager but I had to somehow work through it as I needed to feed myself and my mother. If I get a better job, I’ll surely quit this one.”*

Shrija, who is among the highest earning participants of the study at 21,000 rupees per month, could not meet the needs of the family with her 50% salary. “We would go and stand in line when some rich people near our house or the Municipal Councillor in our ward would give free ration kits,” she recalled in pain.

Sunayana, who is from a ST community and is married, shared how her family could not access food and medicines, and faced trouble paying rent, electricity and water bills. While she earns 15,000 a month, their household expenditure amounts to 31,000. “There are only two smartphones in the entire house, all the children could not access online classes,” she lamented. “I don’t even have PF in my part time job. They (employer) did not provide any facilities while our family suffered during the pandemic,” she added.

In some instances, the participants received safety equipment such as masks and sanitizers at the workplace. Lokesh, who works as an assistant manager, explained that it helped him greatly that the employers provided transport to reach the food retail store he works at. Others were left to make do on their own even as affordable public transport was not operational. Vaccination drives were practically unheard of and most employees were expected to

vaccinate themselves to return to work, even as vaccine availability remained sparse for many months into the unlockdown.

The treatment towards women only gets worse at a time of upheaval. Shreya, for instance, spoke of her experience of sexual harassment even in the distressing time of the pandemic. “My manager harassed me during the lockdown. I could not do anything at all.”

### **2.3.2. Worsening working conditions and a contrasting sense of merit**

Although facilities provided by employers are minimal and the pressure to perform is high, there is a strong sense of individual merit among participants of the study. Very few workers seemed to want to demand what is rightfully theirs. The study was specifically interested in what the workers’ expectations from the state are. While Pallavi said: “They should treat us well and give us respect. They have to raise our salaries,” Shaila more specifically said: “They have to give equal salaries to both men and women... women should not receive less salary... because the work is the same, the effort is the same.” Shruthi, who is 20 years old and migrated to the city with her parents for educational opportunities, said that the number of working hours must be reduced or capped by the government. Similarly, Zahira felt that the difference in payment for full-time and part-time jobs must be done away with, as the number of working hours is the same for both roles. Nithin added that if there are any problems caused to workers in their workplace, they should be given compensation. Safina’s response was particularly interesting as she held the government responsible for ensuring education for vulnerable groups:

*“I wish some mandated rest would be given to us because it’s too draining to stand all day. I also wish some scholarship or any form of monetary help is given to those students who work in retail as part time workers. Some study time should be given to us while we work in retail so that we don’t leave*

*education altogether due to economic pressure. We should not be made to choose between work and studies.”*

A common response among other participants was that the government would not understand their needs. “How can I expect anything from the state? They (decision makers) are never satisfied with how much (money) they make... what will they give us?” asked Sathish bitterly. Prakash too had similar sentiments and added: “These things (facilities from the government) won’t even reach us anyway.” This resonates with what Pandey et al., (2021) find in their study on retail workers’ dissatisfaction: “Policies are for compliances, not for our welfare” is a commonly held sentiment, since existing policies are not properly executed, discouraging retail workers from hoping for better conditions.

Another recurring response to what they would ask from the state was silence or hesitation. 36 year old Parimala similarly said: “I have no idea about it.” Similarly, 19 year old Mohan said: “I have no expectations, I don’t even know what to ask.” Added to this, an understanding of individual failure and success is prevalent among the participants. In one instance, Mohan said:

*“If we do our work and meet our targets, there is not much difficulty. We should know how to retain customers and ensure sales. Only when we don’t do the work, we don’t get an incentive and we have to finish that work the next day. Only then there is pressure from the manager.”*

Evident in these responses, is the internalisation of the idea of the efficient worker. This perhaps reflects the kind of training the workers receive about the notions of work, reward and punishment, and the discouragement to question authority. That their “failure” is due to structural reasons was not articulated by some of the participants even if they do, perhaps, hold such ideas.



On the whole, systemic exploitation has only increased for the participants. While financial constraints existed even before the pandemic, their working conditions have worsened after the pandemic. Cuts in salaries, demotions, complete lack of incentives and payment even with extended working hours with fewer staff, and withdrawal of bonus have all adversely affected their already precarious economic condition. In the next section, we explore how such working conditions have affected retail workers in malls before and after the pandemic.

### 3. Corona and compromises: health as a casualty

Casualisation is the norm in the retail sector, making it difficult for workers to negotiate with employers for the benefits that must accrue to them. However, as mentioned before, many of the participants in the study have been provided with PF and ESI benefits in their contracts that range from part-time to full-time jobs in a permanent position or for a short fixed time. Despite these benefits, the employees are subjected to unregulated working hours which adversely affects the health of workers involved in, among other roles, sales and customer service in departmental stores, food preparation, and front end management including cash counter management in food and beverage outlets. This chapter explores issues related to the health and wellbeing of retail workers, with the pandemic being a juncture representing larger patterns in the context of their work.

#### **3.1. Compromises on nutrition and rest at the workplace**

Studies point out the grim state of adolescent and youth nutrition in India, with the prevalence of underweight, overweight, obesity issues, and micronutrient deficiencies among these populations, especially among vulnerable groups (Shroff and Shokeen, 2019). In the context of young people working in the retail sector, Pandey, Singh and Pathak (2021), in talking about job dissatisfaction among retail employees in the country, show how workers are unable to follow healthy routines in the workplace and often skip meals and the managing leadership fails to fix such practices. In this context, our study was interested in understanding how retail workers are able to tend to their nutritional needs and find rest breaks.

Participants shared their experiences with regards to breaks to eat and rest during their shifts, specifically about the duration of the breaks. Naina, whose experiences of sexual harassment

as a migrant worker from north India paints a horrific picture of the retail sector (detailed in the previous chapter), said: “There is no fixed time for lunch break. We (sales executives) go one after the other (take turns).” Arun, who comes from a Scheduled Caste group in Karnataka, and works in the same shopping mall as Naina, said they have no break and no designated place to eat either.

Among those who have a lunch break at a fixed time, there is a pressure to return to work at the earliest. Even as employers expect the staff to work overtime without any monetary compensation, they expect the staff to be punctual and admonish them severely and in a humiliating manner in case of any slip ups. Sarini, who works in a departmental store in a mall on the periphery of the city, said:

*“There is no sitting at all in retail. We stand all day. There’s nothing we can do if we get leg pain. At some point we go inside and sit for a few short minutes. We get used to it here.”*

23 year old Gopal who has migrated from another state in South India, said:

*“We do get a break but there is a lot of pressure to complete the target within our shift... if we don’t complete it, they consider it as an off-day (leave) and cut 250 rupees from our salary.”*

The long hours of standing are without exception. As discussed earlier, the apparel and footwear considered appropriate for women workers, especially in departmental stores, are high heeled shoes. As Safina pointed out, these regulations cause severe physical strain. “If it becomes chronic, it can be very difficult during pregnancy,” she said. Sunayana, 24 years old, added: “Women who are on their period also get no rest at all. We are paid so little for so much hard work.”

As the pandemic persists, research is beginning to show that ‘long COVID’ or long term physical effects such as fatigue and muscle weakness are found in surviving patients for more than two years after acquiring the virus (Lapid, 2022). Immediately following the first wave of COVID-19 in India, a survey conducted in November 2020 showed that even in urban areas, young people could not access nutritional food due to the lockdowns, and medicines and supplements due to their unavailability in the market (Nawani et al., 2021). A very small percentage of this youth had any knowledge about the symptoms of anaemia and its relation with immunity.

At a time when there must be concentrated effort on improving nutrition and immunity levels among children and youth, many young people, including those in retail as our study shows, are unable to pay attention to their own bodily needs because of the very material barriers that their workplace creates.

### **3.2. Heightened mental distress in the face of the pandemic**

The lockdown that followed the corona virus outbreak changed the overall educational system, particularly in terms of everyday classes and evaluation methods that moved online. This shift has had an adverse effect on the life chances of marginalised communities that struggle with an already existing digital divide (Talesra, 2020). With minimal access to digital technology, young people had little chance at keeping up with daily classes, assignments and exams conducted online. As seen in the previous chapter, one of the participants, Lokesh, was unable to meet his own expectations, as well as that of the job market, at the end of his educational journey as a result of the lockdown. The paid work that was expected to alleviate his family from poverty, barely helped meet basic needs during the time of the lockdown. The different narratives by participants show that these kinds of circumstances have caused great anxiety among the young workers.

Naina recalled that during the initial lockdown, while she worked as a domestic labourer in her hometown, she had to buy two new smartphones for her brothers so they could continue attending school online. “Data plan, food, medical instruments (thermometer, oximeter, etc.)... purchasing all these things became very difficult,” she said.

Similarly, Rohan said:

*“They had been cutting 10% of our salary till December 2020. My father keeps falling ill and my mother is always taking care of him. We could manage before the pandemic but with the salary cut, and no increment for two years, I had no money to pay EMI... our loans increased. Everyone’s mental state deteriorated during the lockdown. Even now we work 10 hours but there is no incentive.”*

On returning to work in the different stages of the unlockdown, alongside economic constraints, participants were anxious about the risks of working in the middle of an uncontrollable pandemic. The fear of contracting the virus added to the everyday stress of meeting targets and following the stringent rules of the commercial establishments. Shreya spoke of her anxieties of working in a place where one would have to come across hundreds of people in a day:

*“When malls opened, I wondered how to go to work there... what if I get covid... my parents are bound to get it from me... what if they die from it. I was really scared but the situation at home was bad and I had to work.”*

With companies laying off a large proportion of their staff, participants were left with more responsibility. 25 year old Vivek, who prepares food in a retail store said:

*“I joined full time work because of the lockdown. Even earlier there was no break for lunch or to go to the toilet. We couldn’t even sit in the six hours of work. Now they have employed less people and extract more hours of work from us. During the lockdown and after that, I was not able to send money back home, so my mother could not purchase her medicines and her health failed. I too could not afford to eat food on some days... especially meat. Since all the grocery stores were so crowded, I could not even bring groceries home.”*

This way, employees facing economic and physical distress, experienced immense mental stress due to the uncertainties and precarity brought about by the pandemic, the subsequent lockdowns and company policies during the lockdown phases. Participants also talked about their individual struggles to cope with the systemic problems during the time. For instance, Divya who holds a bachelor's degree, said:

*“I am the only one in our house who had a job during the pandemic. Everyone else was unemployed and staying at home. I had to cope with the targets because I had no other choice but to earn for the household. I was afraid to travel to work but I kept drinking boiled and cooled water. I followed the rules of using a mask and sanitizer, and carried on.”*

In the next section, we focus on the responses, or the lack thereof, by companies in handling issues that cropped up during the different phases of the lockdown.

### 3.3. Coping with coronavirus: Lack of support from employers

As has been established, companies adopted various measures to cut costs in the face of no or decreased sales. However, some of the narratives by participants reflect some initiative taken by the companies in order to facilitate work as usual. Lokesh, for instance, said:

*“Since we could use the vehicle they (the company) arranged for commuting, it was easy to reach the retail store. We had to maintain social distance at work and change the mask every six hours. They were also checking our oxygen level before we entered and providing sanitizer.”*

27 year old Dileep, who has several years of experience in retail spoke about the different facilities provided by the company he works for:

*“They did not fire anybody because of the lockdown. They called some for work sooner and the rest later... after about 2 months of the unlockdown. The company has helped provide us with Health cards<sup>4</sup>. The incentive has been less but these days it is back to how it was before the pandemic.”*

Others too spoke about the regulations followed in malls and how these precautions provided a feeling of safety. However, these very regulations could also result in heavy penalisation for any minor negligence. 20 year old Shruthi said: “We have to constantly wear the mask. If anyone sees us taking it off at any point, we will get a bad rating. All this is while we keep standing and billing all day with leg and wrist pain”.

The narratives tell us that companies did not make it their prerogative to take up relief work even for their own employees in the critical time of the first and second lockdowns when

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Health cards’ usually refers to the government health assurance scheme which aims at providing a health cover of Rs. 5 lakhs per family per year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalization. <https://nha.gov.in/PM-JAY#:~:text=Ayushman%20Bharat%20PM%2DJAY%20is,the%20bottom%2040%25%20of%20the>

ration and medical facilities were unattainable for most of the population. Participants like Pallavi, who works in a clothing retail company, shared their continued anxieties about working in retail in the circumstances created by the pandemic:

*“I first thought the lockdown would last a month but it went on for very long, so we faced a lot of difficulties. My mother is a domestic worker, so she became COVID positive. I also fell sick while taking care of her... I struggled with it for days. On some days we have gone to sleep on empty stomachs because there was no food at home. I was afraid that they would fire me during the pandemic. I’m still afraid and anxious of how to fulfil all of life’s needs in this profession,”* (Pallavi, Bangalore).

While it was made compulsory to be vaccinated in order to return to work, the responsibility to receive the vaccination was completely left to individual workers. The study did not come across instances where companies arranged vaccination drives for employees.

The State of the World’s Children 2021 (UNICEF, 2021) says that grief, uncertainty and loneliness have gripped children and young people in the time of COVID and that they could feel its impact on their mental wellbeing for years to come. Besides these repercussions, the pandemic has also left people grappling with ‘long COVID’ and its symptoms, showing us that immunity and nutrition is key to good health. Ensuring good health needs to entail special attention to retail work where a large proportion of Indian youth are now labouring. The current working conditions in the sector have already caused immense loss in terms of health for the young workers. Their aspirations and ambition for their future need to be protected through material changes in the sector in terms of break time, restroom facilities, travel to work, psychological support and effective redressal systems for employees in instances of sexual harassment.



## 4. *Family First*: Negotiating relationships and romance

The retail sector has provided a straightforward route to transition from education to paid work for participants in this study. Without previous work experience, and with varying levels of education, they have been able to support their families, often the sole earner in the household. We found that families place high expectations on these working youth, irrespective of their gender. In this chapter, we take a look at the relationships retail workers have with their families, and how the pandemic affected these relationships. We also look into questions of romance, love and companionship; the opinions and experiences young retail workers have in relation to them.

### **4.1. Supporting the family through continued economic crises**

For the participants in the study, retail has been a livelihood that dismal economic circumstances brought them to. With a decline in the numbers of jobs being created in other sectors, participants with higher educational qualifications also find themselves in organised retail (which, in our study, mainly includes departmental stores, food and beverage stores) as sales executives. Their income varies between 7,000 and 21,000 rupees per month (for similar working hours but under varied contracts of part-time and full-time work) and entirely depends on the companies they work for, unregulated by any policies. These low paying jobs consistently fail in providing any relief or upward mobility to the families in which these youth are the first generation to receive higher education.

Participants in their early 20's, while straddling the expectations of the society to marry and “settle down”, also bear the responsibility of running the household and paying off older debts. For instance, Shaila, who is 25 years old and holds a masters degree in arts, said her family doesn't talk about her marriage as she is the only earning member of the family and

has to repay the loan made for her sister's wedding. It appears that the only reason keeping her from being pressured into marriage is that they are financially dependent on her. She understands that if not for this reason, she would have to take the typical path set out for young women, perhaps constraining them from growing in their careers.

Arun, 22, who has his parents and two siblings to take care of back home said:

*“I do good work here... skills, smartness and handsomeness are all important for this job. Girls may be facing many problems, it is true. But boys too face difficulties, especially those from villages who have family responsibilities. We have no rest or enjoyment in life. When I first arrived in Bangalore, I was sleeping in Majestic (bus stand) and going to work in the morning. Later, one of my friends got a rented house and a group of us now share it.”*

There is immense pressure on workers like Arun to keep the family afloat. This cycle of expectations that began with the participants joining the sector, persisted through the moment of the pandemic and has stretched beyond it as the economic crunch became far worse than before, with family members losing their jobs. One of the participants, Umesh, who is 28 years old and holds a B.A. said: “They are trying to get me married, but I have this commitment at home. I have taken loans from the bank and also outside, from people I know. There is also the EMI on my bike. So it is difficult now.”

Participants who are in marital homes, have to negotiate with their in-laws about working overtime. 27 year old Preethi, for instance, said:

*“I am constantly going back home late because the work doesn't have a fixed closing time. I always get scolded by my in-laws. I don't wish to work in retail*

*for this reason... I have to find another job... Maybe it's possible because the economic condition is not so bad at home."*

For such youth who are married, the pandemic brought on different kinds of challenges at home. 27 year old Nithin, for instance, lives in a household with 11 members. Sharing how the lockdown impacted him and his family, especially his wife, he said:

*"I could not repay the loans I had taken for my marriage and the interest went up. I had to stay at home without a job. The value they (family) saw in me and my wife disappeared because we could not contribute financially to the household... they lost respect for us. My wife and I could not even sit together and talk at home. We went away to her father's house. But I had to find work because of the loans. Now I travel two hours to reach the mall and work 10 hours straight... It is very exhausting. There is no promotion possible in this job anymore, so I have to find something else. Corona has ruined our lives."*

A commitment towards the family extends to abiding by their rules in relation to romance, love and marriage. In the next section, we look at the search for companionship by retail workers and complicate the ideas expressed by the participants.

#### **4.2. The taboo of romantic love before marriage**

The total lockdown meant that the participants had to stay indoors in the small rented homes that they can afford with their income. Forced into that proximity, participants found their interests conflicting with that of their family members. Nithin, who talked about how he and his wife could not have any privacy said:

*“When everyone was home all the time during COVID, my wife and I could not even sit together and talk. I was not able to respond to what she was feeling, what difficulties she may have been going through.”*

25 year old Vivek, for instance, said: “I could not meet my girlfriend throughout the lockdown. It became difficult to maintain the relationship.” Similarly, Shruthi, 20, shared how she could not keep in touch with her lover and that opportunities to meet him decreased during the lockdown.

*“We have been meeting at least once a month for the last year and a half. Nobody at home knows about him. They insist that I get married to a man that they find for me. We (partner and I) hope we can convince them to accept our love. But I’m afraid to tell my family. During the lockdown, it was difficult to talk to each other. We would send texts but could not talk over the phone at all because my parents and siblings were at home. But now that’s not an issue... we have started meeting again.”*

Instances in the study show that young workers do not wish to strain their relationships with their family on account of finding romantic love or companionship. Young people, without the approval of their families to choose their own romantic partners, often keep it a secret or end the relationships when the families find a “suitable match” from within their own caste and community. Although there were such instances in our study, participants also shared how they do not want to choose a partner or pursue romantic love without the consent of their families. “My first and foremost responsibility is to take care of my family” was a recurring idea among the youth. A feeling of gratitude towards their parents and family members overwhelmed any expression of the desire for romantic companionship. This perhaps points

to the way in which the youth are socialised to believe that following their own desires is a transgression, not a choice or right that they ought to have.

This idea of transgression also extends to the way the youth view their workplace. When asked about love and romance in the workplace, participants were quick to deny any such instance. However, the opinions about the workplace are complicated by how women and their agency is perceived in the public realm. As discussed in previous chapters, the retail sector is ridden with cases of sexual harassment that go unreported. The exploitative working hours extend late into the night and employers, staff and customers alike view the women as either promiscuous or too vulnerable to be able to take action against their abusive behaviour. As Zahira said: “It is not easy to even maintain friendships in the retail sector,” implying that on the one hand, friendliness is assumed to be promiscuousness and on the other, the cut throat competition for incentives and reaching targets, and the replaceability of the workforce make even developing friendships an impossibility. Friendships, though, can provide the intimacy that young people crave for and the space to explore their needs and desires. In the world of work too, they open up possibilities of coming together to demand what is rightfully theirs.

Questions around romance were also unaddressed by participants largely due to the limitation of the research methodology employed in the study. As participants were approached in their workplace, without any prior notice or discussion to build rapport, participants did not find it suitable or comfortable to express their opinions and share their experiences on the subject, especially in a professional setting. The environment in which youth in retail stores in malls work clearly sets up the space as devoid of subjective experiences or emotions, and as objective as long as one follows the rules.

These conditions at home and work make it nearly impossible for youth working in retail in malls to imagine a future of fulfilling their own dreams and desires with respect to love, romance and companionship.

## 5. Conclusion

Situating our project alongside studies on the shifts that the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crises created in labour, we have foregrounded the question of youth and their livelihoods. Qualitative in nature, the study has charted out how the pandemic has impacted the lives of organised retail workers in malls between the age of 18 and 30 in Bengaluru. Although the analysis here is not generalisable to experiences of all retail workers, it is contextualised within the specific life-histories of the 30 youth who gave us their time for the in-depth interviews and provides insight into the larger political economy within which the young workers live.

We have sought to make our approach holistic by being attentive to the lives of young retail workers, beyond their paid labour hours. Such an approach has helped us understand how retail work fits into the larger scheme of their everyday lives. It has also helped us unpack multiple axes of marginality, and recognise that within the precarious world of urban retail, those marginalised by ethnicity, gender and caste face a greater set of challenges and setbacks.

Across the three core chapters, that each focus on work, health and family/relationships respectively, we find that the pandemic exacerbated the challenges youth working in malls in Bangalore already faced. The first chapter, providing a glance at literature on organised retail in malls, has demonstrated with demographic detail that the youth found in retail in malls are those marginalised by different axes of caste, class, gender, ethnicity. The second chapter delves into the nature of work before and after the pandemic, the increasing informalisation and fragmentation of the workforce and the brunt borne by the young retail workers during the pandemic and the ensuing policies on salary cuts and layoffs. We also pay close attention to experiences of sexual harassment and caste and ethnic based discrimination faced by the

workers. The third chapter analyses how these policies too, apart from the bodily illness that the virus caused, impacted the young retail workers' health in relation to nutrition, rest, mental and emotional wellbeing. These included the pressure to be inoculated against the virus on their own, without the employer's initiative to ensure vaccination for all employees. This lack of support by employers is but a feature of the neoliberal system of contractualisation and informalisation. In the fourth chapter, we look into the ways retail workers' relationships with their families and romantic partners were affected due to the pandemic. We have shown that, in trying to negotiate for space, privacy and autonomy in relation to love and romance, the responsibility they have towards caring for their families compel them to compromise on their own needs.

While as researchers, our analysis has foregrounded structural challenges for youth in the industry, we find that most young people articulate their own work-lives through ideas of individual merit and performance alone. This discourse of efficiency propagated by a neoliberal economic system and internalised by young people who are already marginalised, forces them to continue to live in precarity. Their workplace – the glittering mall – becomes an archetypal symbol of our neoliberal times as it continues to invisibilise the needs of these young people.

The process of research itself, that forced us to grapple with the fact that youth workers in malls are constantly surveilled and pressed for time, made us reflect upon the purpose and outcome of this research constantly. In this context of rapid informalisation of the workforce and decline in the chances of any collectivisation, we are left with the question of how we can take forward our engagement with youth workers. How can we work towards creating support systems for young people in retail – systems that can ensure growth, upward mobility and wellbeing? We hope this report has begun the conversations necessary to address these questions.



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