



# Reimagining the World of Work for Domestic Workers: COVID and Beyond

**Keeping the voices of domestic workers front and centre**

## **National Level Virtual Round Table**

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This roundtable discussion was led by the Martha Farrell Foundation in collaboration with Nari Shakti Manch, the National Domestic Workers' Movement, SEWA, National Alliance of People's Movements, Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), Jagori, Samarthan CDS, Domestic Workers Network, Domestic Workers Forum Chetanalaya, Delhi Gharelu Kamgar Union, Shahri Gharelu Kamgar Union, National Platform for Domestic Workers (NPDW) and Gharelu Kamgar Panchayat Sangam.

### **Context**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been excessively felt by informal migrant workers. They've found themselves faced with impossible choices between health, hunger and survival at this time.

Among the informal working population in India, the domestic workers - largely made up of women - have found themselves in a doubly disadvantaged position, with an acute rise in their vulnerability to exploitation, violence, harassment, forced labour, and more.

The absence of legal support, caste discrimination, poor economic and social status, have left them defenceless against the rise in stigma and branding as 'COVID carriers', loss of wages and livelihood during lockdown, and an increased vulnerability to sexual harassment at the workplace, in light of their new economic vulnerabilities.



Official figures situate informal domestic workers at roughly 4 million. However, unofficial numbers estimate nearly 50 million, with a majority of them being women.

Most domestic workers are the sole bread-earners in their families and the lockdown created debilitating economic challenges that impacted their families and households, putting them in a very desperate place for work and job opportunities.

### **Assessment**

The Domestic Workers Action Network (an initiative of the Martha Farrell Foundation) [conducted an assessment](#) on the impacts of COVID-19 on domestic workers living in Delhi and Haryana.

The assessment, which covered 146 women workers, reflected that 95% of the workers had not received their wages since March. Other glaring challenges included the fact that many lost their jobs in the beginning of the lockdown, many were forced to leave their families and live in their employers' homes if they wanted pay, and those who wanted to return, could not do so, because of the high cost and lack of seats on the Shramik railways.

On June 16 2020, which was observed as International Domestic Workers' Day, the domestic workers, emboldened by the data they collected, took action by deciding to collectively issue a manifesto, outlining their conditions for safe and dignified work, in the context of COVID-19 and the challenges it brought.

Over 60 domestic workers led a National Level Round Table Conference to issue a statement for 'Reimagining the world of work for Domestic Workers: Covid and Beyond'. The virtual Round Table was co-organised by a network of Domestic Workers/Unions and Organisations, where a number of domestic workers came together with Ms. Geeta Menon (Activist); Sister Lizzy (Activist, National Domestic Workers Movement); Fish Ip (International Domestic Workers Federation); GD Prasad (Labour Officer, Chhattisgarh); Soumya (Samarthan); Aya Matsuura (International Labour Organisation) and Elizabeth (Nari Shakti Manch).

The discussion focused on the urgent policy frameworks required to provide protection and dignity to the livelihood and working conditions of domestic workers in the country.

## Challenges Faced by Domestic Workers at the Workplace

Domestic workers highlighted barriers faced by them at their workplace, ranging from lack of health and safety protocols in place for their protection; heightened exposure to violence at the hands of their employers; lack of central legislation to provide legal protection as well as lack of dignity attached to their labour.

Hema (name changed) from Delhi said her employers didn't even call her once to check how she was doing during the lockdown - they didn't pay her during lockdown and didn't inform her about when she could resume work. *"They conveniently told the guard not to let the domestic worker in,"* she said.

Surakha (name changed) from Mumbai said, *"My employers were refusing to let me go back home when the lockdown was announced. They confiscated my phone and Aadhaar Card. If we did not hide another phone with us, we could have died."*

Bhanwari (name changed) from Delhi, said that many of her sisters were out of work and their upper-class employers were denying them their full wages. *"With rising oil prices, we're also having to contend with lack of affordable public transportation in our routes."*

Jyotipriya (name changed) from Hyderabad said, *"Some states like Telangana have made it mandatory for us to produce a No Objection Certificate (NoC) so we can return to work. How can we pay for it? It costs somewhere around Rs 2000! Shouldn't our employers show us a clean bill of their health as well, if they're demanding it for us?"* She added, *"Most employers don't pay for COVID tests for domestic workers - but we cannot afford to pay for them because of our meagre incomes."*

Arti (name changed) from Gurgaon expressed her anguish about her inability to pay rent during the lockdown and her plight as a single mother and sole breadwinner of the family. She said *"I don't know about Corona but we will probably die of starvation before anything else."*

Finally, there were the challenges to domestic workers abroad, who were penniless, distraught and anxious, and forced to live on the streets as their employers made them leave their homes. The domestic workers at the roundtable demanded the government's attention in prioritising their safe return.

## Key Demands Voiced in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

- We expect that our concerns to be seriously considered by policy makers
- As important stakeholders, we expect from RWAs that they should notify an order to the employers of each household to give the balance payment of all the domestic workers working in their society
- Employers will treat us well, with dignity and not label us as “Corona carriers”
- We expect employers to provide us with the same professional and safe environment that they would expect from their workplace.
- Your home is our workplace. Do not create a hostile work environment for us.
- Keep your homes hygienic for us; wear masks and follow Covid-19 protocols.
- Pay us at least half of our salaries during the lockdown.
- Pay for our medical tests for detecting Covid-19 and do not cut the money from our salaries.
- Give us Covid-related information since many of us do not have access to accurate information. Provide us with PPE kits and sanitisers for our safety and yours.
- It is also essential that domestic workers have the same recourse to time-bound justice in cases of sexual harassment at the workplace through Local Committees as other workers do.
- Workplace harassment and job insecurities are ever-present for us. The insecurity is intensified because of the absence of regulatory structures, redressal mechanisms and labour laws to protect us and our work.
- Bring domestic workers under the ambit of Labour Laws and employment regulations.
- Support Domestic workers from India who are stranded abroad to come back home safely. Many have been thrown out of their houses and others are unable to do so because of the costs.
- Ratify ILO Conventions 189 and 190 to accord domestic workers their rights as stipulated under global standards. Ensure time-bound redressal of sexual harassment faced by domestic workers at their workplace.

## Policy Recommendations

The session culminated with domestic workers laying down specific policy recommendations for their welfare, given below.

- **Humanise relationships** between employers and domestic workers and attach dignity to their work by being sensitive to their concerns
- **Universal registration** of employers as well as domestic workers with the State labour departments, to allow for regulation of working conditions and prevention of violence and harassment of domestic workers
- **Central legislation** dedicated to domestic workers on the basis of the Model Bill submitted by the National Platform of Domestic Workers:
  - Consideration of domestic workers as **unorganized workers** by the Central Government and facilitation of Government benefits to the domestic workers as provided to the unorganised worker
  - **Standardise wage calculation**, and ensure domestic workers receive the standardised minimum wages.
  - **Efficient grievance redressal mechanism** to address concerns of domestic workers
  - **Regulate work hours**, paid leaves, maternity benefits, clean drinking water, health insurance
  - Protect women domestic workers' **sexual and reproductive health rights**
  - Legal provisions for **pension and post-retirement age security and benefits** for domestic workers. (i.e. EPF contribution, strengthening of existing system and policies in place)
- **Making the Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972** applicable to domestic workers legislation, hereby having an element of social security for the workers as well as providing a sense of dignity attached to their labour
- **Making Maternity Benefits (Amendment) Act 2017** applicable to the domestic workers legislation and employees' compensation to domestic workers as a class
- **A common Act for placement agencies (domestic workers)** at national level and inter-state registration of the agencies
- **Provision of centralised database management** (agencies, workers & job location) and dedicated 24x7 helpline number for the domestic workers

- **Formalization of agreement between house owner, domestic worker and agent/agency:** a common agreement should be prepared/designed by the state
- **1% of property tax** paid by employers should be dedicated to Domestic Workers Welfare Boards
- The government must transfer **Rs. 5000 to every domestic worker** in light of the pandemic and additional challenges
- **Domestic workers stranded overseas need urgent help.** The Indian Embassy must use the Indian Community Welfare Fund to bring them back safe.
- **Funds to be allocated to domestic workers who are single mothers** from the corpus of funds allocated by Domestic Worker Welfare Boards, as well as by the Central and State Labour Commissions.
- **The number of rescue shelters should be expanded;** they should cater not only to young domestic workers but also old women domestic workers, whose livelihoods are increasingly threatened in the wake of the pandemic.