

THOSE WHO STAYED

An anthology of first-person narratives by
migrant domestic workers of their COVID experiences

Documented by Domestic Workers' Action Network



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Introduction

Even before the COVID lockdown, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) and Martha Farrell Foundation (MFF) have been collectivising domestic workers across Delhi NCR into an action network for the implementation of sexual harassment at workplace redressal mechanisms at district levels. With the onset of the pandemic, external support and their past experience helped them realise their roles as security officers, relief access points and community reporters, capacitating them to document their experiences of the pandemic, advocate for their rights and dignity, and act as a support system for vulnerable women informal migrant workers across the capital region.

This anthology is authored by eleven domestic workers who stayed back in NCR during the lockdown, either by choice or by chance. **THOSE WHO STAYED** is an effort to raise some of their most burning questions and issues arising out of the pandemic and its management, told in first-person through short journal entries. Further, it presents the findings of a study they've conducted (on how the lockdown has impacted domestic workers) in a qualitative manner, besides offering a glimpse into the network's role in transforming passive agents to active change-makers, adult learners and community leaders.

DISTANCE AND SPACE

Our jhuggi is a ticking time-bomb for the spread of COVID-19, which will explode the day we have a positive case.

Sanitisers and soaps are a luxury for me and my neighbours in Gurgaon (Phase V). We hardly get to eat two meals a day during this time; how will we afford sanitisers?

Drinking water is another challenge for residents of the *jhuggi*. Some of the better-off residents use bottled water. Majority of us use common hand pumps to store drinking water for ourselves. Clean drinking water has a price which we cannot afford. Many of us use detergent to wash our hands as well as to wash clothes. When we run out of food and money, the detergents are forgotten. Everyone lives, eats and sleeps together in our settlement.

Concepts such as physical distancing, hygiene and sanitation are a distant reality for us. We live in tiny rooms huddled together within a small radius. There are two toilets available for forty families. There are no gender-segregated washrooms; women go for a bath carrying their water inside the cubicles while the men bathe outside. The toilets are often muddy and stinking. Hundreds of people use the same washroom every day; it is impossible for us to practise physical distancing and maintain hygiene in such circumstances. There is no running water in the toilets and everyone carries water with them, which is acquired from the stored water collected in the tank. This water, used for bathing and cleaning, is dirty and unhygienic.

-Rekha (name changed), 30 years

NO GOING BACK

May has begun. It's rent week. I don't know when madam will call me back to work. She hasn't been receiving my calls.

I, Tabassum, have been living in Delhi for about a year. I moved out of my hometown in Kolkata when I was 24 years old. My family consists of my husband, my eight-year old son and my new-born baby girl. I live in Wazirabad and work as a domestic worker at a household in the complex near my *jhuggi*. I make 6000 rupees per month at madam's house; my husband (also a domestic worker) makes roughly the same. My husband and I work very hard to make ends meet. Our monthly rent is 4000 rupees which barely leaves us with any savings, after monthly household expenses.

The COVID-19 lockdown has been a major source of anxiety for me. Language is a huge barrier since I am not very fluent in Hindi, making it difficult to communicate. My brother speaks better Hindi than me so I have been using his help to speak to volunteers who have been distributing food and rations in our area. Madam sent me my salary for March but we haven't heard from her since April. We have been relying on our meagre savings, loans from the *kirana* store and rations delivered by volunteers. On many occasions, volunteers have confused another Tabassum in my *jhuggi* for me, and she would end up getting my share of rations by mistake. As a result, I got left out and hardly received any dry ration until the end of April.

With May, I hear that the lockdown has eased. Several offices are opening at one-third capacity. But my madam has not called me to return, nor received my calls to ask her when I can resume my duties. When I had gone to ask for paid leave

APART BUT CONNECTED

As a sole-earning member, my becoming jobless has taken a toll on my family's well being. Being a part of MFF's support group helped me regain some agency during the lockdown.

Originally from West Bengal, I have been living in Gurgaon (Phase V) where I also work as a domestic worker. The epidemic is proving to be an extremely difficult time for me and my family of five. Within the span of a month, I was reduced from my family's sole wage-earner to a jobless migrant worker without any other skill. Nevertheless, my brother recently got a job as a delivery agent, but it doesn't bring in a lot of income.

We have some savings but it is not enough to last us in the event of an extended lockdown. With the money dwindling, I am perpetually anxious about impending loan payments and monthly EMIs. We have also run out of LPG gas. I am borrowing money from acquaintances time and again, to buy essentials. Our employers have said they will pay us some money in advance. But I don't like the fact that I am getting paid without doing any work. I haven't been keeping good health due to low haemoglobin, but I cannot afford medicines, fruits, or milk for my condition right now. My mother is doing most of the household work while my younger sister sometimes helps her a little.

Television and phones have been the greatest source of information for us, when it comes to government and health guidelines for COVID-19. As instructed, we try to maintain distance from people as much as possible, wash our hands with soap regularly, cut our nails and keep them clean, keep our house clean, clean ourselves after coming back from the

market, and clean all the food coming from outside. I also make sure not to touch my face and tell everyone to use masks while going out. Early on, we had heard in the news that Rs.1000 will be transferred to our bank accounts and ration will be distributed. Our landlord had come to take our information promising distribution of ration and food to all the families in our community.

But we weren't informed when and where this would take place. What helped me during this Lock down was my engagement with the Domestic Workers' Action Network. We reached out to other domestic workers who were in a worse situation than me - to help them access ration or helplines in case of domestic violence.

On May 7, a domestic worker from my area came to me seeking help. Her employers were continuously delaying the payment of her salary for two months. I took down their number and tried getting in touch with them. I introduced myself (over text) as a community leader of a domestic workers' group, and demanded they clear the dues they owed. They must have got scared because they asked me to send the domestic worker the next day to collect her salary. Since she was scared to go alone (for fear of police falsely framing her for theft), I escorted her to a point and waited at a distance. [I asked her to give me a signal if she felt something was amiss]. But the employers gave her the salary for both months which gave both of us cause for relief and joy.

- **Shireen (name changed), 24 years**

for April, the guard refused me entry and asked me to go back, on madam's instructions to wait for her call after the lockdown ends.

Last night my landlord asked me and the neighbours for rent, but how are we supposed to pay when we don't even have any money to feed our children? My husband claims he will not pay the landlord and will call the Police if need be. Even though the law now forbids landlords to demand rent, I am scared of intervention from the Police; if they come and threaten the landlord, we will probably be thrown out of the *jhuggi*.

I had to pull my son out of school when we left Kolkata. I have been trying to get him admitted to a school nearby; due to the lockdown, the school authorities said they will consider his case after it ends. No one came to warn us about COVID-19, to raise awareness on hygiene practices or relief measures. I don't have a smartphone and cannot access news or government schemes such as e-ration coupons. I just received a mask and sanitiser yesterday although it's already been two months since the lockdown was imposed across India.

What does "physical distancing" mean in a *jhuggi* with a high density of population, where we have to share a common toilet and have no access to masks and sanitisers? If this lockdown continues, with no job, food or money in our pockets, we will be left with no option but to go back to Kolkata. (4 May, 2020)

- **Tabassum (name changed), 24 years**

LONESOME IN A CROWD

My husband committed suicide in the middle of the lockdown. Now I fear for the future of my family. Will we be able to bounce back from this?

Under a tin roof, I live with my parents, children, and my brothers in Gurgaon, sharing a two-room home amongst ourselves. I am out of work at present, and don't know how long I can sustain myself. My biggest concern right now is arranging food for my family. My mother and I go to the nearby school which occasionally provides food to us. At other times, volunteers come and give dry ration to us which sees us through for a few days. Even in this crowded *jhuggi*, I am all alone.

My husband committed suicide when the first lockdown was announced - he had lost his job and was unable to provide for the family. It felt like a brutal storm wreaking havoc in my life. Living in this community lightens my heart a bit, my neighbours' support and chatter keep me going in the day. However, as evening approaches and the *jhuggi* becomes silent, my loneliness and fears start to creep in. I fear for the future. I cannot go home since there are no jobs back home. I cannot afford to send my children to school. I am not even educated enough to remember my phone number.

This pandemic coupled with the lockdown has turned my life upside down. As if the loss of my husband was not bad enough, the lockdown has compelled me to see my family go to bed on an empty stomach. I have been living off loans from the local ration store. I wonder if things will ever normalise post-lockdown. I hope I live to see this.

- **Payel (name changed), 25 years**

AM I INVISIBLE?

Marital life has not been entirely blissful for me. My husband is alcoholic and abusive. When I was pregnant, he had left me for another woman. He returned shortly afterward but now, when I need his support the most, he is back in the village.

I am Shafiya Bibi from West Bengal. I live in Gurgaon (Phase 5) with three children (two daughters and a son). I wish I could blame COVID for all my woes but they began long before the pandemic, probably soon after I got married.

Marital life has not been entirely blissful for me. My husband is alcoholic and abusive. I remember being pregnant with my eldest when my husband had deserted us for a brief period. Today, I can't help recalling the helplessness I'd felt at the time, because once again I am all alone. My husband is back in the village and I have been at my wit's end trying to figure out how to make ends meet here.

With a ration card, I'm forced to dip into my savings to procure rations, with very little idea of what'll happen when it's over. To add fuel to the fire, shopkeepers in our area are increasing the price of commodities at will. The same oil we used to purchase for Rs.110 is now available for double the price. Cost of LPG and vegetables have also increased and the government is either oblivious to this or couldn't care less. In order to save money, we are eating one meal a day, and kill all remaining appetite with black unsweetened tea. This way, we will die of hunger before COVID manages to kill us.

Speaking of which, we are following the necessary health and hygiene protocol for social distancing and self-isolation as

much as possible. We have learnt the importance of staying in, using masks, washing hands and clothes, and not touching our faces, from TV and WhatsApp forwards. I still go out to get essentials, leaving my kids behind, but due to the money crunch, I haven't been able to go to the market as often lately. I sometimes visit my friend Shireen, and we watch the television together at her place, maintaining a distance of course! When people come over to my house, I usually don't allow them to enter, preferring to talk outside.

On top of everything, our landlords are asking for rent and refusing to forego it given the circumstances. I have no place else to go, so the fear of being evicted keeps me up at night. My employers have been good; they have given us paid leaves and offered some extra money, but I couldn't bring myself to take it without offering my service.

But what is the government doing, I ask. Why haven't we received our free ration and direct cash transfer yet? Not long back, a policeman had come with our landlord and took down our details and checked our ID cards. But we never heard back from them or the local officials. I feel like my struggles and existence have become invisible. Nobody calls to check in to see how I am doing, or if I need some help during such trying times. My husband calls once a month nowadays. I break down into tears whenever I think of him and his unkindness. But I also know he is just as helpless, he doesn't know what he can say to help me either.

- Shafiya Bibi (name changed), 24 years

IN MY NECK OF THE WOODS

When the lockdown was announced, I was at home, ironing some clothes (which I do to earn some additional income) while my husband was watching TV. Now, I am not sure how long we can subsist on our savings. For us daily wage earners, savings aren't a lot anyway.

I am Mithila, a 24-year-old domestic worker in Delhi. I live in Old Sabzi Mandi, with my husband and two daughters. I have always been the sole earning member, but now that the lockdown has made me jobless, my family is left without a source of income. I have to think twice even before buying essentials, like milk for my daughters. Only some of our employers are helping us but not all of them have given us paid leaves or full wages during the lockdown. That said, a few of them have bought and delivered us rations.

We also heard in the news that the government will transfer some money to our zero balance accounts but I haven't received anything yet. We enquired about the ration distribution too which has recently started in our area - we are getting 18 kg ration for three people (including rice and flour).

Besides earning my livelihood as a domestic worker, I used to iron people's clothes at home for additional income, but everybody has stopped giving me clothes to iron because of the fear of infection. Because of COVID, we are ourselves scared to go out, lest we should catch the infection. We are unable to meet anyone, unable to talk...I am especially scared for my children as they are both very young now. I am not allowing them to go out of the house at all. Police patrol our area from time to time. When people disobey the social dista-

-ning rules and form a crowd, the police rush to attack them, sometimes arrest them or force them back into their homes. My neighbours abide by the curfew for the most part. They don't really go out except to buy essentials. Sometimes, they get tired of being inside, as our houses are also extremely small and it gets suffocating. They start coming out and linger on the streets outside their homes, only to be driven inside by the sight of the police.

This game of cat and mouse has been going on for a while. hide because police were arresting and scolding people for staying out. I am aware of the ways in which Coronavirus spreads, mostly from government's messages over the phone and television announcements. It will require our utmost attention to prevent it from transmitting from person to person. We must remember that if we touch our mouth, nose or eyes after touching someone or their saliva, we must wash our hands. I encourage everyone to use masks while going out, cover their mouth while sneezing or coughing, maintain as much distance as possible from people and not venture outside unless absolutely necessary. I am not aware of active testing happening in our area but doctors are unavailable at the nearby clinics. Only chemist shops are open.

I am anxious about my children's education, as their schools are closed with no notice of reopening. How will they cover their studies after this gap? They are unable to go out and play, nor are they able to study by themselves since the environment at home is not always conducive. Despite being out of work, even before the lockdown, my husband never really helped with household chores. That hasn't changed even now. It is mostly me who does all the housework.

- Mithila (name changed), 38 years

FAULTLINES

When people living in such close quarters harbour ill-will against each other on the basis of faith, it is difficult to feel safe.

This entire year has been one crisis after another for us. Even during a global pandemic, people in my *jhuggi* are not above using the disease as a tool to divide and discriminate against us. I am seriously contemplating going back home (Kolkata) because the situation is escalating here in Wazirabad, Sector 53 (Gurgaon), ever since the Tablighi case. Some neighbours are spreading false rumours, sowing terror, and issuing blanket statements like "All Muslims are Corona-spreaders." In some areas, my friends are scared to go out and approach ration distribution centres, despite having Aadhaar Cards, because of the stigma and fear.

I am also scared to go out alone because there is no saying when a mob will turn against us. Even fetching water from the community hand pumps has become difficult as we have been asked to "contaminate" the well. I heard a neighbour pass a hurtful remark the other day, saying "Of course, we use hand sanitisers and maintain cleanliness...We are not like the Muslims."

When people you share such close quarters with harbour such sentiments against you, it is difficult to feel safe. I wish we could all be there for each other during such a trying time.

-
- Faiza (name changed), 20 years

VALLEY OF THORNS

Everyone faces ups and downs in their lives, just like our struggle for food, sustenance and livelihood has intensified due to the Lockdown. But as the days go by, I am starting to think as if Coronavirus isn't the real bane of my existence. My biggest challenge is winning the battle against routine emotional and physical abuse.

I grew up in Bihar, but it's been a good 10-12 years since I have moved to Sonapat, Haryana. I live here, work here, raise my children here and try to wash away my sorrows here. But the lockdown has caged me in with my abusive husband, besides snatching our jobs away. Not only has our income come to a standstill, but domestic peace has ended.

We have a one room house and our grown up children also live with us, I feel ashamed by this behaviour. My biggest worry is also - What will I do if I become pregnant again? I already have 5 children and I am struggling to scrounge for rations to feed them, while my husband is completely apathetic towards our wellbeing. My husband is not concerned about all this at all. He is a rickshaw puller with meagre earnings, that too has stopped coming in. Where will food come from? How will the house run? Will children go to sleep hungry? These real dilemmas mean nothing to him. He needs and gets his meals on time, without which he will verbally abuse me and hit me.

We have already run out of rations at home. Without a ration card, I've had to borrow some money from my employer to feed my children. I clean houses for a living; my employers have asked me to stay at home as everything is under lockdo-

-wn, saying they will call us back when things go back to normal. Although they have paid my salary for March, I haven't got anything for April, nor can I expect it without working. I haven't heard anything from them yet, but I know if I demand my dues for April, I might lose my job altogether.

At times, I go to volunteer-run kitchens to eat cooked meals and bring some home for the children. I only want to be able to spend the lockdown peacefully at home, and look after my children. But my husband not only abuses me, but also verbally abuses the children.

My husband tells me he has 'needs' and I must fulfil them. The entire burden of contraception is on me. I have taken abortion pills before and it has led to several complications. Now with lockdown, I can't even buy these pills. Hospitals are also closed, so even if I get pregnant, I won't be able to get it terminated there or go for a check-up. All this suffocates me.

When I refuse he beats me. I am filled with shame when our children are awakened in the middle of the night by our row. He hits me with anything he can lay his hands on - bricks, stones, sticks. Many times my neighbours have come to my rescue. A neighbour, aware of his behaviour, told me about the 100 emergency hotline, and urged me to report him. I got so tired of his behaviour that in April, I complained against him to the police.

The Police, however, didn't come immediately. They called on the one mobile phone we own and spoke to my husband instead. I don't even know what they spoke about. He shifted

the blame on me and told them I starve and insult him constantly. Of course, I had to bear the brunt of it later when my husband beat me up as retaliation for my 'boldness.'

But I have made up my mind now that I will not tolerate this any more. Although I am not very literate and unable to dial, I have my daughter (she is the one who rang the police up for me). I haven't called the 1091 domestic violence helpline yet. But if he continues, I will lodge a complaint again.

- Suman (name changed), 39 years

FINDING HUMANITY

This lockdown period is a survival battle for us domestic workers and we need our employers to extend a helping hand to help us survive these dark times.

I am a caretaker for a family who primarily resides in Mumbai. I look after their house in Delhi; I regularly clean and dust the rooms and keep the house up and running while the employers are away. I visit the premises once a week to ensure everything is in place. My husband works and resides in Gurgaon while I live near my workplace in Andrews Ganj with my mother and daughter.

My employers have helped me tremendously through the COVID-19 lockdown. They have supported me monetarily as well as provided emotional support - treating me as part of their family. When the lockdown was imposed, I feared for my job. I was worried of wage cuts, making rent and feeding my family. But my employers eased the burden of the crisis to an extent - they call me every few days from Mumbai to ask how I am. They give me information on how to protect myself from COVID-19; that I should stay indoors as much as possible, wash my hands frequently and wear a mask when I am outdoors. They've reassured me that my salary won't be cut and they have been transferring it to my account on time.

This was a big relief for me since I have lots of additional payments to make and I hardly have savings to bank on in times like these. I think employers such as mine set an example for the rest of them and go on to show that we must have mutual respect and concern for our support staff. After all, we have been helping hands for our employers all our lives.

- Leela (name changed), 33 years

A HUNG MOON

The countdown had begun but the spirits were low as Eid befell us quietly, solemnly, in the wake of the COVID crisis.

This year was a quiet Eid for most of us. I was unable to buy my children new clothes because I was trying to save up for a chicken meal. That's all I was able to gift them this year. The last few days, I broke *roza* over a power cut and water crisis in my *jhuggi* (at Neemtala, Gurgaon). Dehydrated in this scorching heat, I sit outside my home in the evening for fresh air, and often lose my train my thought.

Around this time every year, there is a special fragrance in the air; the markets would typically be abuzz with families shopping for new clothes and gifts and toys. Streets would be lit up and we'd all sit together and plans for the holy day.

COVID-19 has turned our life upside down; we are haunted with worries about our future as the uncertainty continues. Now that the railways have opened, I wish I could buy a ticket and go back to my village. My *naani* laments that she may die by the time we meet next. The reality, however, is that I cannot afford to buy a ticket for the train just yet. Maybe some day my family and I will get to go back to our villages, meet the grandparents and celebrate Eid with them with full fervour.

- Najmi (name changed), 40 years

LETTERS FROM ISHNA

I want to come back to work. When is this going to end? Will we survive this?

I am domestic worker from Gurgaon. Last year, due to my husband's sudden illness, I had to take a leave and go back home to my village in Ishna, Burdwan. I was due to return a month before the lockdown was announced. Now, it is uncertain when I will be back. I am worried and feeling very scared, primarily because money is running out...I had hoped to return to work, but now it seems like a distant dream. I also worry for my sisters, fellow women domestic workers in NCR, who haven't made it back home. Although no one in my village work in Gurgaon, there are nearly 10-12 women from the next village who do...None of them have come back. I can only hope they are safe and have found somewhere to stay put in Gurgaon.

Everything here in Ishna is shuttered. We are not being allowed to leave our village. The police are patrolling the village and making everyone stay indoors. The local MLA has travelled the length and breadth of the village, announcing that any kin who wishes to return home must not be allowed to enter the village or their homes. To enforce this rule, party workers have already asked every resident of Ishna for their Aadhaar card, Voter card, father's name and the names and addresses of their children who are working in other states.

The state government has announced some welfare packages for those temporarily out of work but the fact that we haven't been able to access them points the gaps in their disbursal. I heard that dry ration is being provided, but one has to walk

1.5 hours to get them so I decided against going. They also said that they would provide free gas cylinders, Now, I don't have a gas *chulha* - what good will it do me? Word has it that ration will be soon available at the fair price shop in the village.

As if financial woes weren't enough, I to contend with caring for my ailing husband and my six-year-old son, ensuring they get through the epidemic unscathed. My husband is a heart patient and he needs his medicines regularly. I had gone to get medicines for him from the hospital 2 hours away from Ishna.

There was no public transport so I walked to the hospital. It took me 4 hours to travel to and fro. It was scary walking there all alone on the deserted roads. To add to my worries, even the hospitals are running out of medicines now. If my husband falls sick how will I manage? How will I take him to the hospital?

- Nadia Bibi, 30 years



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