

Stranded, but not Silenced:

How Domestic Workers in Delhi and Haryana
were Impacted in the COVID-19 Second Wave



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the domestic worker champions working with the Martha Farrell Foundation, our partners, donors and friends, whose support and active participation has been the driving force behind this study.

This survey was conducted during the Martha Farrell Foundation's COVID-19 Relief Kit Drive for Domestic Workers in the Second Wave of COVID in India. With support from partner and individual donors, we were able to distribute nearly 6000 lifesaving relief kits to women domestic workers and their families during the second wave of the pandemic, and survey 4500+ women to fill critical gaps in data around their experiences. Thank you:

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**THE NETWORK FOR THE RIGHTS AND VOICES OF DOMESTIC WORKERS,
DELHI-NCR**

**INDIVIDUAL DONORS, VOLUNTEERS, INTERNS AND MEMBERS OF THE
MARTHA FARRELL FOUNDATION'S COVID-19 RELIEF TEAM**

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DOMESTIC WORKERS AND THE COVID PANDEMIC

Millions of domestic workers in India, mostly women and migrants, form one of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups of workers in the country. According to an analysis in 2014 by Women In Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising, the lack of recognition as 'workers' and vague 'employer-employee' definitions impedes their ability to access the social security rights guaranteed under the Labor laws (now subsumed under the four Labour Codes).

This, despite the fact that at the national level, domestic workers have been included under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Aarogya Yojana (PMJAY), the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act (SHW Act, 2013), and the Unorganised Sector Social Security Act. To date, improper implementation results in domestic workers' lack of access to benefits assured. For instance, a 2017 study by Martha Farrell Foundation found that only 29% districts had formed Local Committees, nodal bodies for complaints of sexual harassment in the unorganised sector, under the SHW Act, 2013.

With little regulation around the terms and conditions of their employment, domestic workers are consequently forced to battle economic, social, physical and psychological harassment, in the hands of the system, their employers, and law keepers. Their precarious work conditions leave them with little to no bargaining power in the workplace, leaving them vulnerable to workplace harassment and sexual harassment. Low income status and skewed gender equations also makes them vulnerable to domestic violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened this. Domestic workers' invisible status as workers and citizens became more pronounced in their lack of recognition as essential workers in the pandemic. In the first wave, the women domestic workers that the Martha Farrell Foundation and PRIA worked with spoke of being labelled 'Corona Carriers'. The Foundation and PRIA's co-published anthology of accounts by women domestic workers during the first wave in 2020 revealed domestic workers in Gurgaon were struggling to deal with lack of space for physical distancing, loss of jobs and income, increasing risk of violence in their homes, inability to pay rent, and severe emotional duress.

When the first lockdown ended, there was barely any change. Women domestic workers returned to work, many at lower wages than before and stripped of the little bargaining

power they had. Many were struggling to clear debts accumulated during the lockdown. Employers insisted on testing, which was a challenge in terms of accessibility as well as affordability. Employers insisted on domestic workers wearing masks and rubber gloves in their homes, without following any protocols themselves. A domestic worker champion closely associated with the Foundation showed us her burnt hands, because she'd been forced to cook with gloves on, which got stuck to the skillet she was cooking *rotis* in. Fear of inflation, high rent and inability to get their jobs back ran high.

It was at a stage of a slow and inadequate recovery that the Second Wave of COVID-19 struck, characterized by a resounding silence among the women in the early stages. Fear and uncertainty loomed large in the *bastis* (communities).

An initial conversation in early May, 2021 (shortly after the onset of the Second Wave in India) with the Network for the Rights and Voices of Domestic Workers, Delhi-NCR, a coalition of 17 organizations, unions, nonprofits, and social enterprises, with an outreach of 15,000 domestic workers found:

- Domestic workers in Delhi NCR were deprived of any social protection during the second wave, including government and welfare programs, and COVID support
- Majority of domestic workers did not have Ration Cards and lacked Jan Dhan accounts and BPL cards
- Ration shops in the *bastis* had shut down in the lockdown, and resources to purchase rations were also quickly depleting
- Where this time around, domestic workers hadn't been barred from work by Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), employers demanded that the women get tested before coming to work - tests that were inaccessible and unaffordable
- Domestic workers were also being termed 'COVID Super Spreaders' as panic and infection spread even in the *bastis* (a novel occurrence in the Second Wave, the infection had not entered the *bastis* in the first wave)
- Testing facilities were too far from the *bastis* and their homes, and private facilities too expensive
- Many denied presenting with COVID-19 symptoms out of fear of losing the little income they had - however, people in the *bastis* were falling sick
- Employers in Delhi and Gurgaon were pressuring the domestic workers to work full time in their homes to avoid 'exposure' to the virus. Domestic workers were also being asked to take care of unwell family members of the employers, without any intimation as to the nature of illness, putting them at greater risk

As a response to these challenges shared by women domestic workers, Martha Farrell Foundation and PRIA initiated a COVID-19 Relief Kit Drive for Women Domestic Workers in Delhi-NCR in consultation with, and by domestic workers, and with the support of individual and organisational donors.

As the journey took shape over May, June and July of 2021, the impact of the Relief Kit Drive was such that nearly 6000 families were reached. Parallely, the Foundation, using the above inferences as a baseline, worked with domestic worker champions to collect data - conspicuous in its absence in the case of domestic workers- to understand the impacts and consequences of COVID-19 and the Second Wave on a group of women workers who have been systematically rendered invisible - as women, as workers and as citizens.

The findings of the survey are presented in this report.

KEY FINDINGS

- Domestic workers lost their jobs before and during the lockdown
 - Domestic workers who had still managed to retain jobs in some of the households they were working in, found their income had reduced to one-fourth
- With little to no savings and dwindling incomes, domestic workers across the board had begun borrowing money or rations
 - Many domestic workers were still paying off debts from the first lockdown, pushing their financial condition to an extremely precarious point
- Without income, domestic workers began to find it very difficult to pay their rent, electricity and water bills
 - Domestic workers faced harassment and sexual harassment from landlords because of their inability to pay their bills
- Despite the government's response to reach out to informal and migrant workers, domestic workers were unable to access government benefits and schemes:
 - Very few domestic workers had Jan Dhan accounts
 - Widows and single mothers weren't accessing benefits under the Widow Pension Scheme
 - Very few families accessed benefits under Ayushman Bharat Yojana
 - Families had no Ration Cards
 - Some families had Ration Cards against addresses in their hometown
- Impacts were also felt on domestic workers' children:
 - The dropout rate in schools increased
 - Children were at risk of malnutrition, as essential foods became unavailable
- Majority of the families used shared toilets and community toilets which were unclean, did not have constant supply of water and non-conducive to physical distancing and following COVID protocols
 - Open defecation increased across communities
- Pregnancies were extremely challenging to maintain
- Menstrual hygiene products were only sparsely available
- Families were unable to avail of COVID-19 related healthcare facilities:
 - Tests were unaffordable and inaccessible
 - Where testing was done, reports were severely delayed
 - There was confusion and misinformation regarding vaccinations
- Domestic workers and their families faced severe mental health consequences, but were unable to give their mental health any priority

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Prolonged lockdowns and the impacts of COVID-19, had led to many women domestic workers - already marginalized and invisible as citizens and workers - losing hope during the Second Wave. The lack of information and the context around their conditions and lives in the pandemic, the unique challenges they faced *because of* their migrant status, the 'informal' status of their working conditions, all led to the fact that domestic workers were absent in discourse and schemes extended for COVID support.

With the third wave around the corner, and the possibilities of more pandemics in future, in light of major climate shifts, this study was conducted to fill glaring data gaps in the status of women domestic workers in Delhi and Haryana. The objectives of the study are:

- To highlight the socio-economic, health and gender, mental and emotional impacts of the Second Wave of COVID 19 on the lives and rights of domestic workers
- To assess domestic workers' access to resources, benefits and schemes including COVID support introduced by state governments, during the Second Wave and the resultant lockdown
- To highlight gaps in policy response in catering to the rights and needs of migrant informal domestic workers, including distribution of cooked meals, ration distribution in public schools, e-registration for ration cards and door-to-door ration distribution in Delhi
- To map challenges in accessibility to benefits under the Public Distribution System (PDS), Jan Dhan Yojana, Delhi Pension Scheme to Women in Distress (Widow Pension), Ayushman Bharat Scheme, among others
- To underscore challenges to accessing COVID-19 tests and vaccination schemes
- To map challenges in accessing healthcare, including non-COVID related health issues
- To use the findings of the study as a basis to inform policy- and decision-makers and improve the status of women domestic workers, their access to their rights as workers, women and citizens

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

4,463

AGE RANGE

21 - 55 YEARS

GENDER

100% IDENTIFY AS CIS-GENDER WOMEN

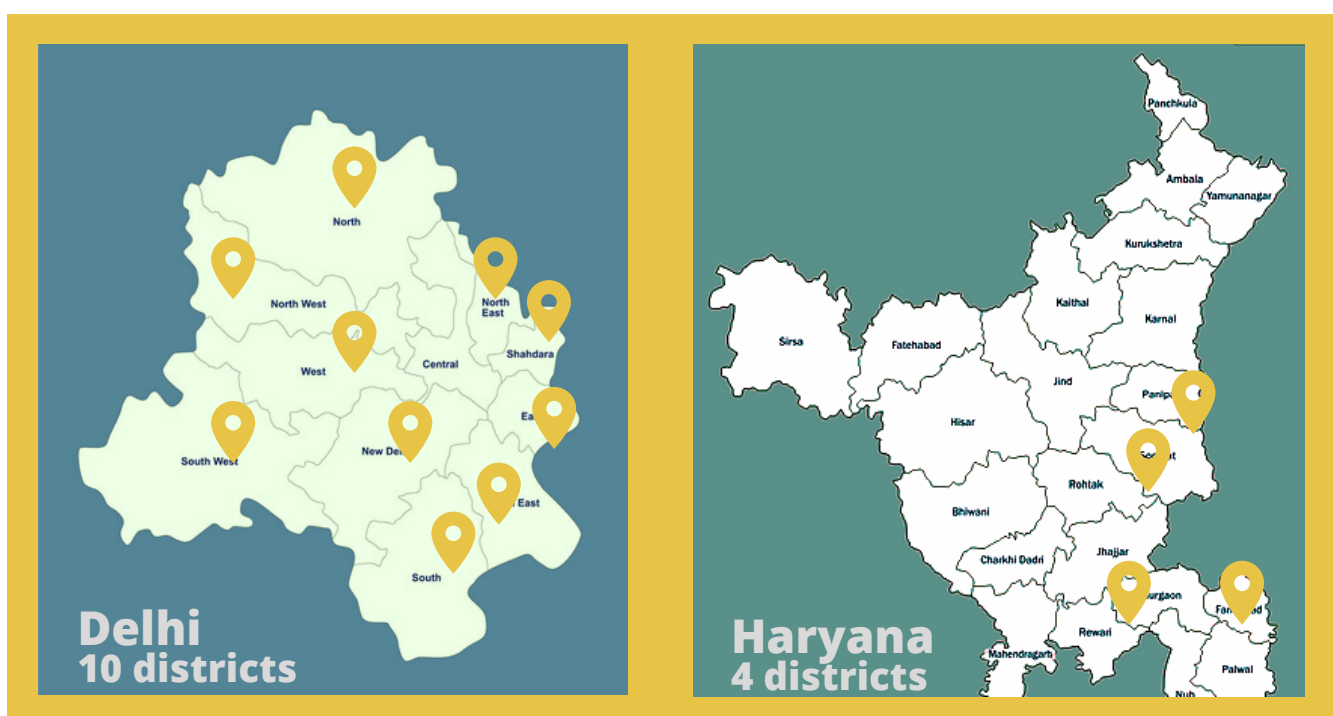
OCCUPATION

DOMESTIC WORK

FAMILY SIZE (RANGE)

MINIMUM 4 - 6 MEMBERS
MAXIMUM 9 - 12 MEMBERS

LOCATIONS (RESIDENCY):



STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted during the Martha Farrell Foundation's COVID-19 Relief Kit Donation Drive with and for Women Domestic Workers during the Second Wave of COVID-19 in India.

The study employed a mixed methodology approach, including quantitative and qualitative data collection. The total sample size of women domestic workers interviewed in the process was 4463.

Domestic workers chosen to participate in the study were selected on the basis of the urgency of their need for relief in the form of ration and medical support during the Second Wave. The database was put together by domestic worker champions, organizations, Domestic Worker Unions and civil society enterprises working with domestic workers in Delhi and Haryana, including members of the Network for the Rights and Voices of Domestic Workers in Delhi-NCR. Participants were identified from a collective reach of 15000 women, through a mix of phone calls, door to door visits and preparation of an exhaustive database, which was continuously updated through May and June 2021.

Experiential narratives were collected from domestic workers by members of MFF's COVID-19 Relief Team, through in-depth telephonic conversations. The survey questions were administered telephonically by a mixed team of program staff and volunteers. The initial set of questions and interviews gleaned insights on further challenges that domestic workers and their adolescent children faced, including lack of toilets, poor menstrual wellness and sexual and reproductive healthcare. Questions around these issues were hence added to the survey and administered to the 2135 out of 4463 women in the latter half of the study time period.

Responses were collected in an Excel sheet for analysis. Narratives were published on the Martha Farrell Foundation's blog, and on articles published during the Second Wave on platforms such as Indian Express, Times of India, Youth Ki Awaaz and regional media platforms such as Subah Savera.

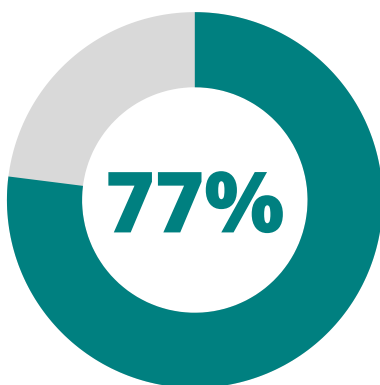
STUDY FINDINGS

I. ECONOMIC IMPACTS

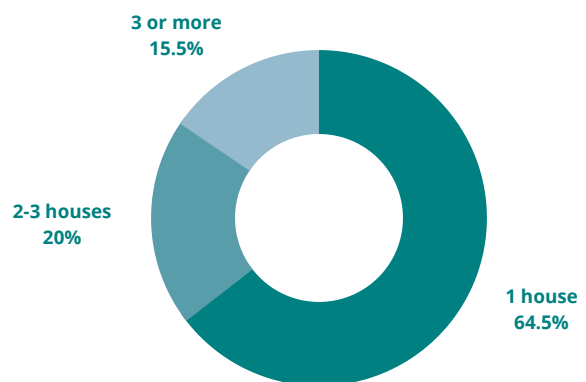
The first nationwide lockdown in 2020 had a devastating impact on informal workers. Domestic workers among them faced the brunt of the crisis - they formed one of the first worker groups to lose their jobs. The little savings that many of them had dwindled during this time. Consequently, when the second lockdown was instituted in April 2021, the impacts were much worse.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Unlike in the first wave, when formal notifications had been issued barring domestic workers from entering housing complexes, this was not the case in the second wave. Despite this, domestic workers were let go of, in some cases even before the lockdown was announced. Sensitization campaigns by civil society organizations had little effect. COVID-related stigma and fear that domestic workers were 'Super Spreaders' of the pandemic, coupled with the quick spread of infection, resulted in job loss at scale.



Out of 4463 women surveyed, over 3424 had lost their employment, against just 1039 who were working.



Among the 1039 working women, 671 women had retained their jobs in just one home, and 210 were working in 2 or 3 homes, as compared to 5-6 households each in pre-pandemic times.

The loss of jobs through the Second Wave resulted in desperation among women domestic workers and their families. In many cases, women began taking up jobs taking care of COVID positive patients, without precautions or safety. The loss of bargaining power in the workplace was such, that domestic workers became even more vulnerable to harassment, sexual harassment and violence in their world of work during this time.

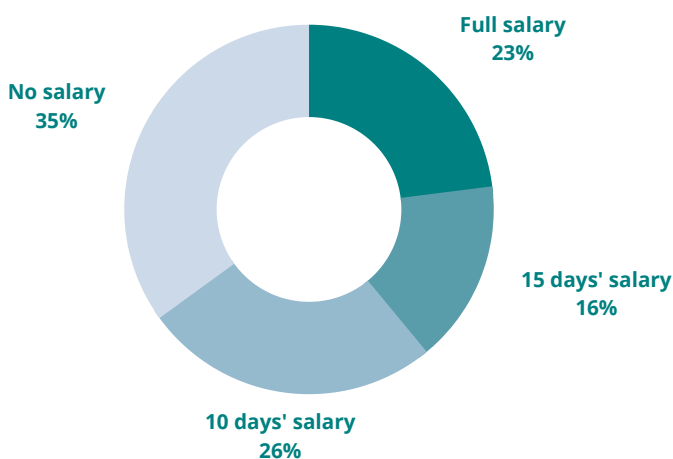
Meena (name changed), a domestic worker from Krishi Vihar, reported: "If you visit any hospital now, you will see large numbers of people standing outside the gate, mostly women. Through the day one can see cars driving up and people getting out of the car shouting, 'kaam chahiye (Do you want work?)' and sometimes when cars draw up, one can see men running to the cars shouting, 'kaam wali chahiye? Meri biwi ko rakh lo (Do you need a worker? Take my wife)'. All the work available is to look after Covid positive patients. I have seen this myself outside Ambedkar Nagar Hospital."

IMPACT ON EARNINGS

With employers shutting their homes to domestic workers, earning and income among domestic workers' families took a significant hit. The lockdowns, coupled with the existing imbalances in power structures between employers and domestic workers, put further strain on domestic workers' ability to negotiate salaries during this time.

Lata (name changed), a domestic worker from Krishi Vihar in Delhi, worked a twelve hour shift in a bungalow, before the lockdown. Her monthly income was Rs. 6000. When the lockdown was instituted, her employers changed her salary structure - she was paid a daily wage of Rs. 150 per day for the days she came to work. Lata would go to work everyday through the lockdown, but doing the same job for 30 days of the month now fetched her a monthly salary of just Rs. 4,500.

Other domestic workers that the COVID Relief Team spoke with had similar experiences. Where employers 'allowed' them to continue coming to work, salary structures were reduced, or they were asked to do more work within the same salary structures they were drawing. Fear of starvation and eviction forced them to continue working without complaint. The impact on their earnings could be felt within the first month of the lockdown itself.



Out of 4463 women, only 1039 were paid in full in the month of April 2021. 1565 did not receive their salary, 1141 only received salaries for a period of 10 days and 718 drew a salary for a period of 15 days in the same month.

Lekha (name changed), a domestic worker from Gurgaon, had been let go from the apartment she worked in with no notice. Her employers refused to take her calls once the lockdown was instituted. She was not paid for the few days of work she had done in the beginning of the month. When she called her employers to ask when she could return to work, her employer shouted at her, saying, 'You don't need to keep calling us, we will call you when you're required!'

MOUNTING BILLS

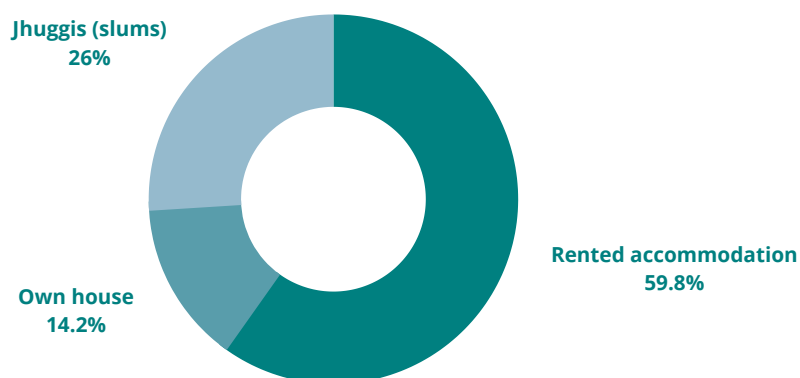
Given the fact that they are migrants from states around the country, many domestic workers live in accommodation that is not their own. The living conditions of domestic workers varied by location, with some living in *jhuggis* or unauthorised informal settlements, some living in urban village settlements in the cities, and a nominal percentage living in their own homes.

Consequently, most women who would use their incomes to otherwise contribute to the rent, electricity and water expenses of the household, suddenly found themselves unable to clear the bills. Those who lived in rented accommodation suffered the most, with many facing threats of eviction by their landlords.

In *jhuggis* of Faridabad (Haryana), Mukherjee Nagar, Govindpuri, Pritumpura and Sangam Vihar (Delhi), domestic workers also reported having to pay exorbitant electricity bills, despite using very few appliances. They were not shown the electricity bills, nor could they question the amounts indicated by meters installed outside their homes.

Lalita (name changed) a domestic worker from Ashok Nagar, Delhi, felt she was extremely lucky to have a roof over her head, even though it means she is at the mercy of her landlord. Food can be forgone, she said, but she worried about eviction and homelessness in the middle of the lockdown.

Out of 4463 women, 2668 families were living in rented accommodation, 535 families were living in their own homes and 1160 families were living in *Jhuggis* or unauthorised informal settlements.



Shehnaaz (name changed), a domestic worker from Sangam Vihar, Delhi lost her husband and son to COVID-19. She'd been left alone, with no support and no income. She had gone back to her hometown in Malda, but wanted to return to Delhi and find a job. She was unable to, because her landlord was demanding a sum of Rs. 14,000 for electricity charges. Until she paid the amount, she couldn't return to her house in Delhi.

While there were landlords who granted concessions on rent to domestic workers, this wasn't a consistent or wide-spread trend. Further, the concessions in many cases were in themselves inadequate. Particularly given their migrant status, it was evident that domestic workers attached a lot of importance to having a roof over their heads.

"Ek time ka khaana bhi nahi khaaya toh theek hai, par kiraya toh dena padtha hai, nahi toh makaan maalik nikal dega (It's alright if we miss a meal, but we can't miss paying the rent, or we'll be evicted)," said Priya (name changed), a domestic worker from Ashok Nagar, Delhi.

Domestic workers in Gurgaon also reported instances of being threatened by their landlords for not paying rent, more commonly reported by single mothers and women living separately from their partners.

A domestic worker from Harijan Basti, in Gurgaon, shared an experience where her landlord would forcibly enter her home at night, sit on her bed and stare at her inappropriately, in the name of demanding rent.



A GROWING DEBT CRISIS

It is important to note here that domestic workers are equal partners and in some cases sole breadwinners in providing for the needs of the families. The impact of the loss of job and shifts in salary structures therefore, rocked the very foundation of financial structures that entire families, including children and elderly members, were dependent upon for survival.

One concerning trend that was observed among domestic workers spoken to by the COVID Relief Team was the issue of rising debt among families. With little to no savings and dwindling incomes, domestic workers across the board had begun borrowing money or rations. Some of the women also mentioned that they were still paying off debts that had collected in the first wave of the pandemic, when they were forced to borrow again in the second.

Suchitra (name changed), a domestic worker from Govindpuri in New Delhi, had lost her jobs in four households in the first wave of the pandemic. Since then, she had been unemployed. When the second lockdown came, her husband, a palmist, also lost the little income the family had had between waves. Suchitra had previously taken a loan of Rs. 7 lakhs to pay for the wedding ceremonies of two of her three daughters. Moneylenders were constantly asking for repayment of her loans. Under heavy debt, the family was struggling to survive, and unable to afford even a cup of tea a day. Their sole access to food came from ration drives organized by civil society organizations in their community.

Women domestic workers were also dependent on the few open ration shops in their communities. Many had 'borrowed' basic ration from corner stores.

Lakshmi (name changed), a domestic worker from Gurgaon, was borrowing money from a local store in her community for survival. She was unsure how long the arrangement would last, and if the store owner would continue to give her ration. She was keenly aware that although he was a 'good person', he also had a family to feed, and might not be in a position to lend her anything else, if the lockdown situation persisted.



II. ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT BENEFITS

Despite the government's response to reach out to informal and migrant workers in response to the exacerbated challenges of the second wave of the pandemic, domestic workers were unable to access such benefits. The context within which this group of individuals exists systematically invisibilises them.

Even pre-pandemic, while domestic workers have been included in the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008 (now subsumed in the Code on Social Security, 2020), their ability to access benefits was impeded by lack of documentation as labour and regulation of their work. Many live without permanent address proofs or live with address proofs in their hometowns and are unable to access schemes in the cities that move to, and live in, making their lives and livelihoods very precarious.

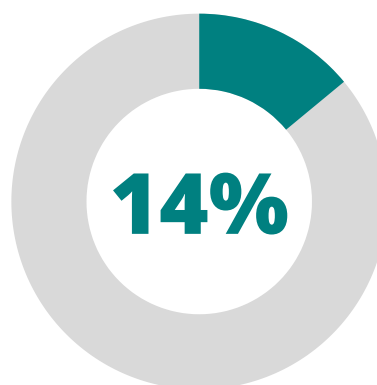
The impaired access to such benefits was felt with redoubled fear and desperation during the pandemic, during which a slew of emergency relief measures for informal workers failed to reach women domestic workers in desperate need of the aid.

JAN DHAN YOJANA

The Government of India's financial inclusion scheme was one of the avenues chosen to reach emergency economic relief and mitigate the crisis in part during the First Wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rs. 500 per month during April - June 2020). As potential key beneficiaries under the scheme, many women domestic workers interviewed in this study were not even aware about the scheme, revealing the extent of unequal access to government schemes.

Further, among those who did have Jan Dhan Accounts, only 13 reported receiving the money in their accounts during the Second Wave, as compared to 98 who said they had received money in the First Wave. In some cases, domestic workers reported that banks didn't give beneficiaries the full payment, and others were unable to access the relief because the banks were closed.

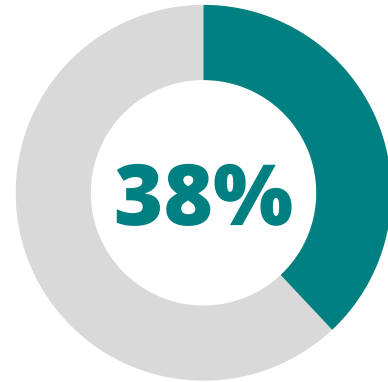
Out of 4463 domestic workers, only 629 (14%) have Jan Dhan accounts.



WIDOW PENSION SCHEME

171 women domestic workers out of 3400 women in Delhi that the Relief Team interviewed were widows. The Delhi Widow Pension Scheme, launched in 2018 by the Delhi government, aimed to distribute Rs. 2500 per month as assistance to such women to enable them to be financially independent. Access to the scheme, however, was not uniform among the women interviewed for this study.

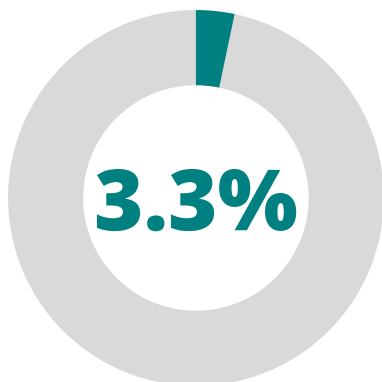
Out of 171 widows eligible for the Widow Pension Scheme, only 65 had received full widow pension. 10 women had applied for it, but hadn't received anything at the time of the study.



The women eligible for the scheme reported that they were not aware of how to access the scheme. 'Mahila sangathans' in the communities were also unable to help. Further, women reported that the online registration process was a challenge for most women to complete as they did not have access to Internet services. Another challenge was making the relevant documentation available. For instance, there were cases where the death certificates of their partners were either lost or back in their home towns. Domestic workers also work without contracts or any proof of income in most cases.

AYUSHMAN BHARAT YOJANA

The 2018 Ayushman Bharat Yojana, which aims to provide free access to health insurance coverage for low income earners in the country, is another critical scheme that domestic workers and their family are eligible for, but are unable to avail of. Particularly at a time when hospitals were overburdened and income generation suffered, the lack of coverage under the scheme for women and their families came at heavy cost.



Out of 2135 women domestic workers that were interviewed, only 71 reported that they availed of the benefits of the scheme.

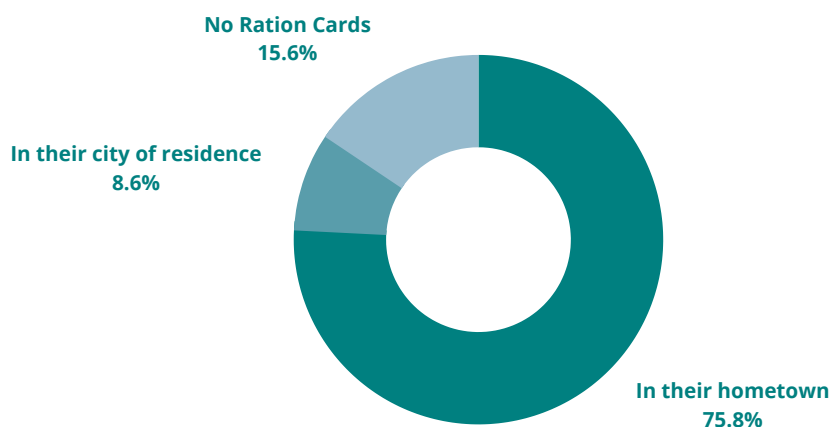
FOOD SECURITY BENEFITS

On being asked about their most critical and urgent need, all the women domestic workers interviewed for this report said it was ration. Many reported intense difficulty in being able to afford even one meal a day.

The primary method for the state governments to provide rations to at-risk families during lockdown was by identifying them using Ration Cards. However, most domestic workers interviewed reported challenges in accessing rations. Where some reported that their Ration Cards had addresses of their home towns, others shared concerns about the limited quantities and items being distributed against their cards.

Many reported receiving only 12 kgs of wheat and very little rice through their Ration Cards. In some areas, domestic workers said they received *bajra* instead of the rice. Other essentials such as oil, sugar and pulses, had to be purchased or borrowed from shops.

Out of 2135 households, 1618 families had Ration Cards in their villages or hometowns, 184 in the city where they are residing and 333 families had no Ration Cards



Another challenge that domestic workers reported was that ration shops would give them *gehun* (*wheat*), which they would then have to get ground and cleaned at a cost of Rs. 5 - 6 per kilogram.

Priya (name changed), a domestic worker from Govindpuri, Delhi, lost her employment in all four houses that she had been working in during the first lockdown in 2020. Separated from her spouse, she used all her earnings to pay rent and food for herself and her two children. "We are surviving the lockdown by relying on rations distributed during donation drives. They come occasionally to our community," she said. She had a ration card in her father's name, but she was only getting 10kg of flour through it. Rice was available occasionally, but there was no sugar or oil distributed. If she took the rice, she would get a reduced quantity of flour.

Very few domestic workers said they received rations from landlords. In Gurgaon's Harijan Basti, local police distributed rations occasionally. A few families reported being dependent on dry rations being distributed to children under the Mid-Day Meal Scheme.

III. IMPACT ON CHILDREN

The economic challenges resulted in significant impacts on the lives of children of domestic workers. As sole-earners or equal contributing partners towards family expenditure, women domestic workers suddenly found themselves in a position where they had to prioritise rent and food over their children's needs.

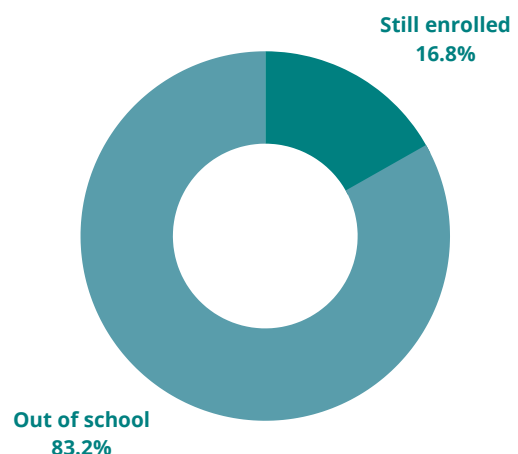
SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Many domestic workers had to withdraw their children from school for one or more of the following reasons:

- Inability to pay school fees
- No access to smartphones to avail of online learning
- Limited or no access to Internet services

Many parents withdrew their children from the private schools they had been admitted in, and transferred them instead to government schools. The curriculum and timelines here, had been delayed, causing students to lose out and fall behind by a year.

Out of 1870 children of domestic workers interviewed, only 315 children were able to continue with their education through online classes on their smartphones. 1555 were unable to continue for various reasons (mentioned above).



Sangeeta (name changed), a domestic worker from Chakkarpur in Gurgaon, was forced to withdraw her child from a private school. The school offered no concession on fees and demanded an additional Rs. 4000 for books. Both Sangeeta and her partner had lost their jobs during lockdown. With no recourse, they decided to wait for the academic year to start in the nearest government school. Their child would have to miss out on a year's time.

NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

Lack of food security and affordability also directly impacted children of domestic workers, particularly those who were below the age of 5 years. Domestic workers reported an inability to afford milk, considered an essential part of a balanced diet.

In select locations of Delhi, domestic workers reported receiving *channa* (chickpeas), *daliya* (porridge) and milk from Anganwadi workers. But this was not a common or consistent trend across locations.

Suman (name changed), a domestic worker from Delhi, is a single mother who had lost employment at the time of the interview. She received no support from her employers, neighbours or Anganwadi workers or government. "My child is only one, and he went hungry for an entire day." Suman had run out of ration and had no money to purchase anything. She could only watch helplessly as her child cried the entire day, without anything to eat.



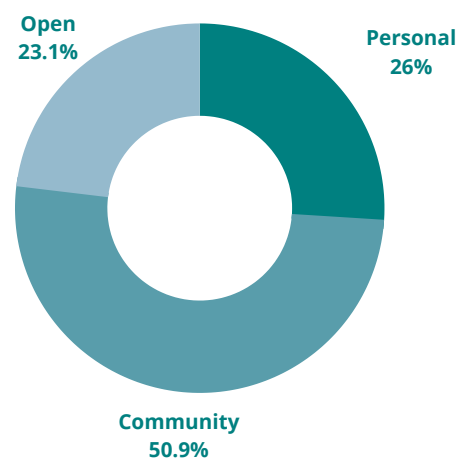
IV. HEALTH AND HYGIENE

The COVID-19 pandemic put extreme stress on domestic workers' ability to maintain health, hygiene and wellness. Several contributing factors put domestic workers and their families at risk of COVID-19 itself, particularly because of the fact that the infection spread within the communities. Besides COVID-19, families struggled with other related challenges.

ACCESS TO TOILETS

During the pandemic, lack of access to toilets had even more severe consequences for domestic workers and their families.

Out of 2135 families, 555 had access to personal toilets with proper running water. 1086 families were using community toilets, of which 5 families said they were charged Rs. 5 for each use. 94 families defecate in the open fields or jungle due to lack of toilets.



Open Defecation

Domestic workers reported a rise in open defecation in communities - both in Delhi and Haryana. Shared community toilets or public toilets presented three key challenges:

- **Distance:** The nearest community toilets built by the government was too far for families to use
- **Affordability:** Families reported being asked to pay an extra Rs. 300 for using shared toilets, which became unaffordable
- **Cleanliness:** Domestic workers shared that defecating in the open was preferable to using community toilets, which were not cleaned or properly maintained.

This, despite the fact that women were cognizant of the safety risk from sexual and gender-based violence of defecating in the open, to them and their daughters.

Challenges in Shared Toilets

On the other hand, the use of shared toilets, particularly among families residing in *jhuggis* (unauthorised informal settlements) made it virtually impossible for domestic workers to maintain COVID-19 protocols of physical distancing. In Harijan Basti - Gurgaon, for instance, there were two toilets shared between six families. In Bhalswa Dairy - New Delhi, it is much worse, at one toilet for fifteen families.

Community Toilets

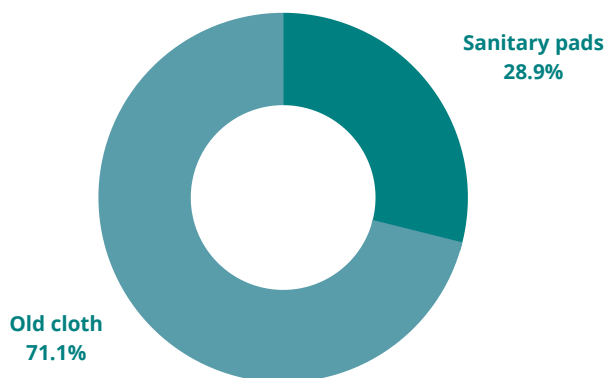
Use of community toilets was also a challenge because of a general lack of cleanliness. Further, domestic workers also reported instances of a lack of water supply.

Lalmati (name changed), a domestic worker from Taimoor Nagar in Delhi said she and her daughters couldn't use the toilet after 10 pm at night. The community toilets near their home shuts down by 10 pm. Out of fear for their safety, the women do not dare defecate in the open. Even in cases of emergencies, the family does not relieve itself after 10 pm.

MENSTRUATION

Proper menstrual hygiene and wellness was a challenge in communities even before lockdown. Unhygienic use of cloth and lack of affordability of sanitary pads were contributing factors. To date, many menstruators use cloth in unhygienic conditions in the *bastis* (communities).

Out of 1941 menstruating women, 561 women were using sanitary pads, while 1380 were using old cloth during menstruation



Among those who could afford pads and those who were dependent on pads distributed in their children's schools, however, accessing safe and hygienic menstrual products became very difficult during the lockdowns.

PREGNANCIES

Pregnant women and lactating mothers found it very difficult to manage their pregnancies during the lockdowns. Accessing hospitals for checkups was very difficult, as the risk of contracting COVID-19 was high. Those who were frequenting private hospitals suddenly found themselves unable to afford consultations, and were forced to shift to government facilities. Finding vacant and affordable hospital beds for delivery also became a big issue as many hospitals were turned into COVID wards. Without proper nutrition, general health of pregnant women also suffered.

The National Commission for Women launched a helpline for pregnant women during this time. However, when a member of the COVID-19 Relief Team supported a domestic worker in using the helpline, she was told to access it on WhatsApp, which she was unable to do.

COVID-19

The Second Wave also witnessed a rise in COVID-19 related symptoms in the communities. Getting tested was expensive and unaffordable, and there was no way therefore to know how many had actually had COVID. Domestic workers were also wary of testing, as they feared being barred from work, if the result was positive. In some cases domestic workers who tested positive were also asked to leave their homes, as families blamed them for bringing the infection into their homes. Any treatment was at this point very difficult to afford, and women also feared for their families' welfare - if they were quarantined, there was no one to cook and care for family members.

In cases where COVID-19 had been diagnosed, it was found that isolation and physical distancing in the small homes and shared community spaces was next to impossible. The only recourse available was dependency on masks.

Preeti (name changed), a domestic worker living with her husband and son, reported that she and her husband both tested positive for COVID. Her son tested negative. However, given the tiny size of their home, which is a jhuggi (unauthorised informal settlement), there was no room to isolate themselves from their son. She said she fed him and took care of him with her mask on at all times.

Testing for COVID-19 was inaccessible and too expensive. In the initial months, the cost of testing was Rs. 800 in private hospitals, which was unaffordable for domestic workers and their families. Government hospitals were too crowded and too far off from their homes for them to be able to get testing done for free.

Bindya (name changed), a domestic worker from Harijan Basti, reported that she and her family of four (three children and her husband) had all begun presenting with symptoms of COVID-19. The local hospital was nearly four kilometers away and she had no access to public transportation options during the lockdown. To get the testing done, she took her children one by one, on the backseat of her bicycle, at a time when she herself had a fever and in the scorching heat of the Delhi summers. There was no other recourse available.

Domestic workers and their families also reported facing neglect in the hands of healthcare staff and severe delays in COVID results and reports. Some women reported that they were denied beds in the hospitals and essential medicines.

Gudiya (name changed), a domestic worker, reported that her husband had fallen ill and passed away within three days. She and her husband had got his COVID test done the same day that he began presenting with symptoms. The report came nearly a week later, and by that time, her husband's condition deteriorated at a rapid pace, eventually resulting in his death.

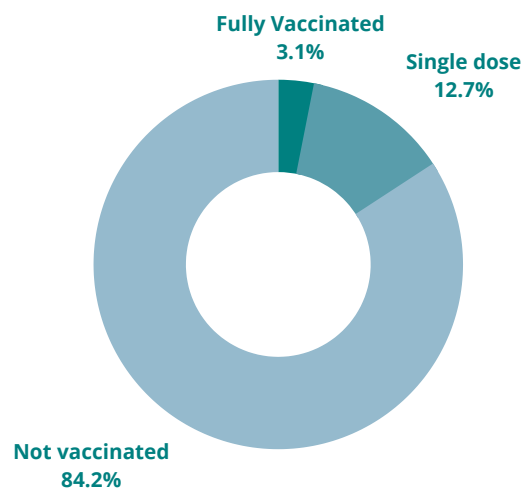
Domestic workers were also being asked to care for COVID-19 positive patients in households, with little precaution or protection from the disease. In some cases, that they were being hired to care for COVID patients was unknown to them, increasing the risk of infection spreading in their *bastis* (communities).

Payal (name changed), a domestic worker from Dakshinapuri in Delhi reported that her employer neglected to reveal to her that the employer and her daughter, whom she was working for in the house, had tested positive for COVID-19. When her fellow domestic worker revealed this to her, she immediately confronted her employer, who said, "COVID toh hawa se phailta hai, hume kya pata kahan se hua tumhe (Covid is in the air, how are we to know where you got it from)?"

Vaccination Status

Misinformation regarding the COVID-19 vaccine had a huge impact in the communities. Coupled with a lack of availability of free vaccinations and lack of affordability of paid vaccinations left domestic workers very vulnerable.

Out of 4463 women domestic workers interviewed, only 703 had been vaccinated during the time of the interviews. Of these, 567 of them got only first dose at the time when this study was conducted.



In fact, in many places, there was no entry restriction to domestic workers during the lockdown in the Second Wave. Those who were working through the crisis, were not accorded their rightful status as frontline workers, putting them at a higher risk of illness. This included those domestic workers who had been hired (and took up jobs in desperation) to care for COVID-19 patients.

Access to Soaps, Sanitizers and Masks

Just 47% of the 4463 respondents said they had access to soaps, sanitizers and masks, during the deadly Second Wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in India. Anecdotal evidence also suggested that even among those who could access soaps, one single bar of soap was being shared by the entire family (approximately 4 - 6 members in each case). They also reported that the masks they had were old, torn and frayed, but they couldn't afford new ones.

MENTAL HEALTH

With the many layered challenges and the systematic invisibilisation they face, domestic workers all reported a serious deterioration in their mental health. With lockdowns in place and the severe dwindling of income, all of them felt they were at the mercy of their employers and the system that remained apathetic.

The COVID-19 Relief Team that interviewed the domestic workers for this report also noted that almost all domestic workers would either break down and begin to cry, or reported physical symptoms arising out of the extreme duress they were under.

Unfortunately, mental health was nowhere near a priority issue for domestic workers to worry about. In the fight for food, work and survival, it remained a sacrifice that the women were forced to make.



CONCLUSION

When the pandemic began, the world went into a lockdown mode and work from home became the new norm - the private sphere suddenly merged with the professional. Employees around the world raised concerns around long working hours, working at odd times and lack of respect for individual's privacy and personal time.

Women domestic workers in India have always worked in this grey space - our homes are their workplaces. Despite our dependency on them to make our homes run smoothly, we fail to realise their identity as professional working women. Additional chores are treated as personal favours, which largely go unpaid.

Full time domestic workers are constantly kept on their toes, with little to no personal time. Ahead of events and parties in the household, domestic workers are expected to stay late hours and do extra work cooking and cleaning. While bonuses are handed out during festivals with an air of magnanimity, there is no conversation around annual increments and overtime pay.

This is true across households, irrespective of religion, state, community, class.

The experiences documented in this study reveal to what extent the rights of women domestic workers in this country are impinged, how dehumanising our treatment of them is - as women, as citizens, as workers.

To date, there has been no notification from the government recognising them as frontline workers. Employers refuse to acknowledge their irreplaceable role in the household, and their contributions in propelling the female labour workforce participation in the country goes unrecognised - after all, women, who are traditionally expected to take care of the household, are able to work because women domestic workers take on the otherwise unpaid labour of women.

That honest working and earning women in this country are forced to witness their children starving, forced to pull their children out of school, forced to bear violence and forced to work in harassing, sexually threatening conditions in the face of a global pandemic; and that it does not shock us, or move us, or propel us into action places a huge question on what we're looking at when we say that we belong to the world's largest democracy.

And the pandemic did not bring these challenges to the fore anew - it just exacerbated the impacts already being felt by women domestic workers everywhere. Even now, there isn't any state-sponsored data study on the experiences of women domestic workers during and because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, we stand on the cusp of a possible third wave of COVID-19, and the eventuality of more such unprecedented threats to humanity in the near future.

It is now that we need to take a cold, hard look at how we recognise the frontline on the war against disease and disaster, and how we choose to treat this frontline.

Domestic worker-led organisations, movements and unions have put forth a list of demands that will help them overcome these challenges and claim their rightful status as essential, frontline workers - including mandatory registration, priority vaccinations and dignified working conditions (fair wages, safety from sexual harassment and humane working conditions).

At the core of these demands lies a very basic, human and natural ask for dignity and space that is due to women domestic workers. Our attention and support as employers, citizens, decision and policy makers is non-negotiable.

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