

# 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

*Led by Martha Farrell Foundation, Nari Shakti Manch, National Domestic Workers' Movement, SEWA, National Alliance of People's Movements, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), Jagori, Samarthan CDS, Domestic Workers Network, Domestic Workers Forum Chetnalaya, Delhi Gharelu Kamgar Union, Shahri Gharelu Kamgar Union, National Platform for Domestic Workers (NPDW) and Gharelu Kamgar Panchayat Sangam*

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The impact of Covid-19 has been excessively felt by informal migrant workers who have found themselves severally challenged with questions of survival and health at this time. Among informal migrant workers, domestic workers are the most vulnerable to exploitation, violence, harassment, and forced labour, especially in the absence of laws that ensure social protection. With unofficial numbers estimated at 50 million, the impact of Coronavirus has been especially difficult for domestic workers who have found themselves severally challenged at this time with questions of survival and health. Women make up a substantial number of them. Most domestic workers are the sole bread-earners in their families and the lockdown has created debilitating economic challenges and job insecurities for them. After India's National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) issued an advisory for urban slums in view of the Covid-19 outbreak tasking domestic workers to stay away from work for another two weeks to ensure that neither they nor their employers catch the infection, the biggest concern is of survival for these workers.

Domestic Workers Action Network (an initiative of Martha Farrell Foundation) conducted an assessment on the impacts of Covid - 19 among domestic workers in Delhi, and Haryana. The results reflected that more than 95% of domestic workers had not received their salaries since March. Many had lost their jobs at the beginning of the lockdown, many were being forced to leave their families and live in their employer's home and those who wanted to leave and go back home were not able to do so due to the high cost and non-availability of seats on the Shramik railways. They went on to frame a manifesto that defined conditions for safe and dignified work keeping the challenges of Covid-19 in mind.

A year after the adoption of International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 189, Decent Work for Domestic Workers, domestic workers declared June 16 as International Domestic Workers Day. More than 60 domestic workers led a National-level virtual Round Table on 16<sup>th</sup> June to observe International Domestic Workers Day for 'Reimagining the world of work for Domestic Workers: Covid and Beyond'. The 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, Chhatisgarh); Soumya (Samarthan); Aya Matsuura (International Labour Organisation) and Elizabeth (Nari Shakti Manch) to discuss policies that will provide protection and dignity to the livelihood and work conditions for all domestic workers in the country.

**The round table discussion focussed on-**

- Deliberating on strategies for actualizing the manifesto framed by domestic workers
- Policy recommendations for registration of Domestic workers/ Social Security
- Law /legislation for Domestic workers

## KEY DEMANDS VOICED BY DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE MANIFESTO

- 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 like “Corona carriers”.
- We expect them 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.

## **IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES FACED BY DOMESTIC WORKERS**

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.

A domestic worker from Delhi Hema (name changed) expressed the apathetic attitude of her employers who did not even call her once to check how she was doing during the lockdown; they did not pay her through the lockdown nor did they bother to inform her when she could resume work. She even stated that “they conveniently told the guard to not let any domestic worker in”.

Migrant domestic worker Surekha (name changed) narrated how she managed to escape the clutches of her abusive employers in Mumbai - *“They were refusing to let me leave (for home) when the lockdown was announced; they had confiscated my mobile phone and Aadhaar Card. If we did not hide another phone with us, we could have died”*

Bhanwari (name changed), a domestic worker in Delhi, reported that many of her sisters were out of work and their employers (belonging to affluent households in South Delhi) were denying them full wages. She also highlighted another acute problem faced by domestic workers returning to work today, saying, *“With rising oil prices, domestic workers are also having to contend with the lack of affordable public transport in our routes.”*

From Hyderabad, Jyotipriya (name changed) shed light on another pressing issue for domestic workers today. *“Some states like Telangana have made it mandatory to produce a No Objection Certificate (NoC) to be able to return to work. But how can domestic workers*

*pay for the NoC? It costs somewhere around Rs 2000! If our employers can demand it from us, shouldn't they also show us a clean bill of their health?" She also added that "most employers do not pay for Covid tests to be conducted for their domestic workers. Testing must be paid for fully by the employer since the workers cannot afford to pay for them owing to their meagre incomes".*

Also discussed at the Round Table was the situation of Domestic Workers abroad who find themselves penniless, distraught and anxious on the streets as they were asked to leave their employers homes at the onset of Corona. They are unable to afford the air tickets back. Domestic Workers enquired about and demanded the Government's attention in prioritising the safe return of domestic workers stranded abroad.

Arti (name changed) who works as a domestic worker in Gurgaon expressed her anguish about her inability to pay rent to demanding landlords during the lockdown and the plight of single mothers who are the sole earners for their families and children. She said "I don't know about Corona but we will probably die of starvation before anything else".

**Ms Geeta** highlighted that there is a huge stigma attached to domestic workers as being 'corona carriers'. She added that we must dispel these notions about how slums are corona ridden and apartments are corona free which is a gross distortion of facts. **Sister Lizzy** added that successive Governments have failed to take bold steps to create robust socio-economic security mechanisms for domestic workers. She said that employers often objectify domestic workers calling them when they need them and throwing them out at their whims. Agencies who purportedly help domestic workers find jobs are in reality, their biggest exploiters. **Fish** supported this claim, stating that domestic workers are hugely underpaid and the first to get fired. They are most vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of their employers and their agencies. **Soumya** highlighted how these agencies take 50% of their salaries as fees, leaving them with the bare minimum to survive. **Elizabeth** closed the session by suggesting that our

power lies in our collective voice and we must continue this fight to claim back our space in the labour force of this country.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING DEMANDS OF DOMESTIC WORKERS



The session culminated with laying down specific policy recommendations 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 regulate the working conditions under which they operate, and to be able to prevent and address violence committed against 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** & benefits for domestic workers. (i.e. EPF contribution etc.- 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 Rules
- **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 under the current scenario in order for them to survive the pandemic.
- **Domestic workers stranded overseas** need urgent help as well. The Indian Embassy can use the Indian Community Welfare Fund to help bring the workers back to their home country.
- **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.