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Tracing Distress and Enhanced Precarity: Gender Analysis of the Lockdown in India

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Dedicated to Soumya Jha

This project is our collective labour, and we dedicate it to our dear friend and fellow traveller, Soumya Jha, whose untimely death on 25th May 2021 has left us shattered. Soumya was a fighter, as was evident in the way she silently and bravely fought her illness till the end. We admire the fact that in spite of her illness, she kept working on her portion of research and fieldwork till she could. Her contribution to our team through informed suggestions, and her dedication towards our cause, can be felt in the essence of this research.

Always ready to take on new roles, always eager to learn, she was a budding researcher, and she would have wanted us to complete this project through and through. Soumya's resolve to improve her work is an inspiration to us all. We thus dedicate our final efforts to her and hope that she will be proud of what we have together achieved in these difficult times.



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A Note from the Project Mentors

The Women's Studies Centre (WSC) has continuously striven to carry out socially meaningful research that instils in its members the much-required sensitivity, genuine concern for and solidarity with movements for justice and equality. This academic year (2020-21), we have broadened the scope of our research and also the size of the Research Cell. Our more expansive endeavours, and this particular project, are influenced by the massive social and economic disruptions, loss of human lives, and the humanitarian crisis that we have seen unfold this past year since the COVID-19 pandemic set in. In an attempt to map experiences stemming from a context of heightened livelihood crises, dislocation, alienation, and reinforcement of prevailing socio-economic disparities, the WSC launched this project on the lockdown period of 2020. It has been our effort to shine critical light on much-needed reforms in favour of women, especially for those from marginalized sections of society, and in keeping with the demands of social justice.

The project is anchored in documenting the voice of the highly exploited sections of working women, such as those in paid domestic work, construction, garment production, etc., and the detrimental effects of the ill-fated lockdown on their everyday lives and livelihood well into the post-lockdown period. The project also attempts to trace social exclusion that the shift towards online learning has helped reproduce while schools and universities remain closed during the ensuing pandemic.

This research was envisaged while 'unlock restrictions' were still quite pervasive, and fieldwork was pursued around the time that the pandemic's second surge unfolded. The project's completion is thus proof of the sheer commitment of the student researchers, and their belief in the social relevance of their work.

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Tracing Distress and Enhanced Precarity: Gender Analysis of the Lockdown in India – An Overview

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Introduction

This research project attempts to provide a general overview of the status of women, and in particular of working women, during the period of lockdown triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing months of gradual lifting of lockdown restrictions. The focus of the project is anchored on documenting the voice of the most marginalised sections of working women, such as those in paid domestic work, construction, garment production, small-scale vendorship, etc., and the detrimental effect that the ill-fated lockdown has had on everyday lives and livelihood well into the post-lockdown period.

This project was envisaged while ‘unlock restrictions’ were still quite pervasive. Consequently, data collection has been based on small samples and the structured-cum-semi-structured interview method. Our findings are based on an engagement with existing data and analyses, which we have strived to verify against our own sampling and documenting of experiences. Our research has focused on collecting experiences of the following segments of women and attempts at documentation:

- i) Garment workers
- ii) Domestic workers
- iii) Construction workers

Apart from a closer examination of these segments of women, it was also our endeavour to trace some of the experiences of a spectrum of working women like professional nurses, small-scale vendors and daily-wage workers, as well the experiences of women students from socially and economically vulnerable sections of society whose education was compromised by the closure of schools and colleges. Our study has led us to recognise the *differential* nature of experiences that stemmed from pre-existing inequalities in accessing resources and from prevailing economic statuses of the households to which women belong. In terms of working women, differential experiences were also evident, given the specific nature of work and the industry to which working women were tied.

Overview of general conditions reported

The unprecedented lockdown triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic nurtured widespread panic in the nation, especially as many stared at an uncertain future, marked by unemployment, dwindling resources, and shortage of food and shelter. The rate of unemployment in April 2020 and May 2020 was over 23 per cent, which was three times higher from the figures noted in 2019 (Vyas 2020). The direct impact of the loss in jobs fell most heavily on the *informal* sector, with an estimated 400 million informal sector workers in India being thrown into extreme poverty, as per reportage by the International Labour Organization report (ILO 2020). Needless to say, the majority of informal women workers have been faced with long-term unemployment even while the economic sphere of the country is limping back to normal. Factors such as feminized care work and household chores; the lack of food security; and inadequacy of public infrastructure to meet the needs of social reproduction¹ are expectedly hindering opportunities for the majority of women to improve their lot in the post-COVID-19 context.

In the global context, 740 million workers out of two billion informal workers are women (ILO 2018). These figures in themselves appear conservative, given the limitations of data collection itself. For example, the work of *informal* women workers has been vastly under-reported even in pre-pandemic times. This is despite the fact that in countries like India, up to 90 per cent of women are employed in informal set-ups (ILO 2018). Indeed, several estimates on loss of employment during the lockdown-cum-pandemic can be considered conservative figures, considering how women have been usually perceived as associational migrants and their mobility or work has been neglected, reducing them to a ‘missing’/invisibilized status in government data. Correspondingly, they are often side-lined in the policy measures.

With the setting in of the pandemic, followed by lockdown, women proved more likely to lose employment, especially in the rural areas (Azim Premji 2020).² Reportedly 139 million inter-state migrants were impacted due to the lockdown (IWWAGE 2020), although these are inconclusive figures, given the paucity of data on women migrant workers. Men have lost

¹ Social reproduction consists, broadly speaking, of caring directly for oneself and others (childcare, elder care, healthcare), maintaining physical spaces and organizing resources as part of an indirect process of care for oneself and others (cleaning, shopping, repairing), and species reproduction (bearing children) (Hester & Srnicek, 2018).

² A series of studies carried out by Azim Premji surveyed informal workers in the states of Karnataka, Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Telangana, Orissa, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Pune. The studies were conducted in two rounds and highlighted the plight of vulnerable households and the impact of the lockdown on them, wherein women informal workers were the focus of the studies (Azim Premji, 2020).

employment too, but according to independent surveys, the brunt of the pandemic is borne by the female labour force (IWWAGE 2020). Indeed, studies show that the impact of the lockdown has differed in the context of different sectors of the economy, and has disproportionately impacted different genders (Chakraborty 2020). Very evidently the brunt of unemployment and slash in wage rates in the period ensuing lockdown has been borne by informal women workers, who were amongst the first to be denied their existing jobs and wages in the lockdown (CES 2020). The periods of both the lockdown and subsequent unlock restrictions have impacted these women differently than their male partners, especially because their loss of paid work during lockdown has been more long-lasting, and also due to the fact that the enhanced quantum of household chores and unpaid care work has left little room to look for alternative jobs.

Additionally, it has been rightly noted that the greatest determining factor shaping employment trends and working conditions post the lockdown is the pre-lockdown employment scenario. And so, the extent of informalisation of work relations and lack of regulation in the industry prior to lockdown have to be recognized if we are to come to terms with the debilitating challenges that confront large sections of working people of this country. The passing of the new Labour Codes and the relaxation of the statutory labour laws in several states, is another factor which is influencing (re)employment and current working conditions.

Being burdened by poverty, the lack of job security, and not being documented by state agencies are *not* the only concerns of women that played themselves out since the March to May 2020 lockdown in India. A ‘shadow pandemic’³ of domestic violence stemming from restriction on movement, frustration nurtured in male household members by the loss of employment, crowded living tenements, etc. has exposed women to violent partners/family members for long periods of time, day in and day out (UN Women 2020). This is, in fact, an ongoing crisis affecting the physical and mental security of women across many other parts of the world.⁴

³ The phrase ‘shadow pandemic’ was used in a statement by Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women (UN Women 2020).

⁴ Globally, 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence by perpetrated by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months (UN Women 2020).

(a) The nature of care work and change in lifestyle

With all members of the family at home for longer periods of time, women have witnessed an increase in household chores and care work. We just need to consider the number of children who are not regularly in school and therefore dependent on their parent/s for socialization. In the global scenario, 1.5 billion children have been out of the school because of the pandemic (UNESCO 2020). Moreover, given the feminisation of most forms of care work and domestic work, men continue to enjoy an advantage in the labour market once the economy reopens.⁵ Of course, certain occupations like in the health services, significant numbers of women continued to be called in for COVID-19 duty. Women make up 70 per cent of the global health and social-services staff, making them more vulnerable and in need of resources during the pandemic (WHO 2018). In India, approximately a million Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) and Auxiliary Nurse and Midwives (ANMs) have been assisting with child births and other healthcare facilities, and educating people in the pandemic; placing them at higher risk of contracting the disease (The Economic Times 2020).

Further, on an average, women spend more time doing unpaid care work and are more prone to sacrificing on job opportunities for their partners (OECD 2018). Given the age-old traditions, women in India are at a higher risk of being subjected to unpaid work as they spend more time on household work when compared to other industrialised countries, as tracked by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In India, the average woman puts in around five hours of housework in a day while the average man contributes an approximate of 90 minutes a day, as recorded by the 2019 Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy database (Deshpande 2020).

However, there is a paradigm shift seen in gender roles for the men in the family, as there are many fathers who now have to take primary responsibility for child care, which may erode social norms that currently lead to a lopsided distribution of the division of labour in house work and child care. A sizable number of working women are married to men who have either lost employment during the crisis or have been able to work from home (e.g., many office workers). In such families, some men have turned into co-providers of child care though

⁵ In India, because of women's unacknowledged and unpaid contribution towards many economic activities and also due to social reproduction, men have a hidden advantage in the labour market as they do not have to share the burden of domestic chores (Chakraborty 2020).

studies are still ongoing on the extent of rejigging of housework that has unfolded (Doepke et al 2020).

(b) *The nature of violence in the domestic sphere*

Prior to the pandemic-cum-lockdown, one out of every three women was at risk of facing violence in the domestic sphere (NFHS 2015-16). There has been an increase in the number of cases reported during the lockdown; namely because women have been forced to live in close quarters with their abusers for lengthy periods of time. At the beginning of the lockdown, the National Commission for Women registered 69 cases of domestic abuse based out of Delhi. Since March, registered domestic violence cases have reportedly risen from 3,287 to 3,993 (Das, Das & Mandal 2020). According to the official data of the National Commission for Women, domestic violence complaints received in 2019 were 607, while in 2020 between March and May, they registered 1477 cases (NCW 2020). Between March 23 and April 16, the NCW received 239 complaints of domestic violence as compared to 123 complaints during normal times (NCW 2020). Almost 86 per cent of women who experienced violence never sought help and 77 per cent of the victims did not even complain about the incident to anyone (NCW 2020). The frustration generated out of loss in employment, along with the stress of not having access to basic infrastructure is a major cause of rise in cases of assault against women in their own homes. Statistics from epidemics such as Ebola and Zika in 2014-16 and 2015-16, respectively, also revealed an increase in domestic and sexual violence, due to the stay-at-home conditions of quarantine. Studies show it is bound to happen once again (WEF 2020).

Loss of income, especially for males leads to lesser control over economic security, leading to an attempt in exerting more control on their vulnerable partners. The consumption of substances such as alcohol also perpetuate violence out of lack of control, and the mandated lockdown has led to an increase in the consumption of substances in some cases, while in others, the unavailability of substances may lead to further forms of aggression (Vora et al 2020).

Aside from the cases of domestic violence, another aspect to consider is that there has been a surge in the usage of pornography and the sale of condoms and sex toys, leading to assumptions that there has been an increase in sexual activity (Dedhia 2020). This reflects an increase in sexual violence in Indian households. The restriction in mobility and physical interaction leaves women more vulnerable, without access to safe spaces and lesser

engagement with trusted ones. This impacts women's ability to ask for help, although organisations did predict such a scenario and advised nations to prioritise safety measures for women (WHO 2020). The increase in registered cases of domestic violence across the world have resulted in the crisis being termed as a 'shadow pandemic'; without proper safety mechanisms in place and the usual shelters being inaccessible due to the pandemic.

In its report, 'Unequal burden: how the COVID-19 pandemic is adding to women's workloads', the World Economic Forum highlights how COVID-19 has led to a reinforcement of unjust gender roles on many fronts especially the disproportionate burden of household work falling on women. Though it found evidence that both genders have seen their unpaid workloads increase around the world, women are bearing more of the burden than men. The reading provides evidence with statistics showing how a greater percentage of women are engaging in spending time with and caring for children along with cooking, cleaning, teaching and other similar activities. Domestic labour has always been unaccounted for in economies across the world, despite the number of hours and effort that go into it.

In a number of countries around the world, especially a few less affluent ones in Asia, Africa and Latin America, statistics provided by the United Nations (UN) indicated that the average hours spent on such care work by women was significantly higher than those spent by men. Moreover, it was also witnessed that even daughters assisted their mothers and lent a helping hand towards domestic chores way more than sons, another area of concern. Women working in both the unorganized and organized sectors felt this double burden of attending to 'work from home' arrangements of paid employment, and then spending the rest of the day in back-breaking unpaid domestic labour. For women in the formal sector, this meant regular obstacles to prioritizing of their professional work careers and facing negative repercussions for proving distracted with household matters. For women in the informal sector, the lockdown meant struggling to make ends meet and provide for their households.

Some countries around the world have embarked on certain campaigns to lessen and address the unequal burden of unpaid domestic labour conducted by women. Countries like Australia, Italy and Belgium chose to keep their crèches and nurseries open for supporting child-care while some like Germany and South Korea compensated parents who were impacted by the closure of these essential services. Needless to say, these privileges are not accessible in every country. Hence, it can be confirmed that women have and continue to disproportionately suffer economically from the effects of the pandemic.

(c) Impact on the accessibility to public services

Women are facing a distinct kind of crisis when it comes to accessibility of public services during the lockdown, predicting a wider gap in gender disparity. Especially in the rural sector, reports go to show that women have been struggling to claim basic entitlements in the form of cash transfers due to lack of proof of identification (IWWAGE 2020). This makes it impossible to receive any supplies under the national COVID-19 relief package. Indeed, the lack of documents such as ration cards putting as many as 70 million women under the poverty line at risk of not having access to basic ration supplies (IWWAGE 2020).

Food security is a major concern when it comes to basic entitlements. Worryingly, a reduction in the intake of food was noticed in lower incomes groups. Some studies attribute this to disruptions in the supply chains for the non-agricultural sectors, and eventually even a fall in production of food stuffs (IWWAGE 2020). However, in urban areas, provision stores maintained a stable supply of food and ration. Despite this, the vast population of urban poor was unable to avail resources due to considerable loss in wages and savings. Already facing an increase in household chores, women of labouring households were consequently confronted with the additional burden of providing for food at a time when the Public Distribution System (PDS) was crumbling. Many ended up waiting for hours in queues in order to receive rations through PDS (The Wire 2020).

Research shows that women and members of lower classes, and those from minority communities such as Muslims and Scheduled Castes were more prone to food insecurity. These segments constituted the majority of the vulnerable populations during the pandemic. More specifically, migrant urban poor suffered greatly, with reportedly 7 in 10 migrants having no money for essentials; 83 per cent migrant households facing a shortage of meals; and 36 percent of migrants claiming to have taken loans to cover expenses during the lockdown. Overall, rural and urban migrant households had less access to relief measures such as cash transfers enabled by government schemes, with 4 out of 10 households claiming to have not received any of these resources. Only 1 in 3 households had the required accounts to ensure a transfer of funds through these schemes (Azim Premji 2020).

This brings us to the question of access to public healthcare services. Inadequately manned public healthcare systems with a singular focus on only certain diseases and ailments has expectedly ensured enmasse neglect of health needs of the population. On a global level,

several countries which have already faced other epidemics in the past have revealed an outright lack in vital resources such as prenatal and maternal care, menstrual hygiene kits, access to abortions and contraceptives – all of which put women at risk for more than one kind of health challenges. This is made worse by the fact that women’s finances are weaker than men (WEF 2020). Reports on surveys by Self-Employed Women’s Association reveal that families who were expecting faced challenges when it came to facilities such as obstetrician check-ups and had to pay for services like taxis and additional pregnancy and delivery charges due to suspension of ambulances in non-Covid cases. Lack of access to sanitary napkins and other menstrual products was also a cause for concern (SEWA 2020). Acute shortage of water also posed a problem, putting women at higher risk of contracting infections, while overall residents of crowded slums were vulnerable to not just COVID-19 but other lethal, contagious diseases. Those suffering from serious medical conditions/complications or basically those made victims of silent, undeclared epidemics of other diseases like tuberculosis which were circulating among the urban poor, were of course turned away from hospitals as COVID-19 gained singular prominence.

(d) Informal women workers and their concerns

Before examining the reportage of how informal women workers experienced the lockdown, it is important to delineate the current, wider trends with respect to the informal workforce in India. Notably, the high level of economic growth in the Indian economy during the past three decades is driven chiefly by the increased presence of the informal sector in the economy (Action Aid 2017). The informal sector in India is huge and continues to expand. Still the state agencies do not have proper data on their numbers and their contribution to the economy.

The structure of the informal sector is entirely different from that of the formal sector. Vulnerability characterizes informal employment. Informal workers’ workplace environment is not regulated by health and safety legislations. These workers rarely receive overtime payment, a minimum wage, non-wage benefits such as paid vacation and sick leave, health insurance, etc. They have little or no formal means of managing risk as they are not covered with pension benefits. They have little access to mortgage loans or scholarships to help finance housing and education (Action Aid 2017). In recent years some piecemeal social welfare legislation has been introduced such as the 2008 Unorganised Workers Social Security Act. However, relief has been limited, especially considering that for a largely non-unionised

workforce the access to social security lies solely on the will of the state to implement welfare policy.

Informal workers are vulnerable to various forms of exploitation by employers as they often work without written contracts. These units typically operate at a low level of organization, and are usually micro to small scale enterprises. Work relations are based mostly on casual employment, and shaped by informality rather than existing as contractual arrangements with formal guarantees. The uneven, unregulated nature of this sector makes it extremely vulnerable to sudden shocks. Importantly, there has been an unprecedented rise of women's participation in informal sector services and manufacturing (Action Aid 2017). Closer examination of statistics shows that women are over represented in sectors such as domestic work, construction work, beauty and wellness industry, sex work, etc. which are precisely the sectors that have seen massive loss of livelihood and enhanced precarity since the lockdown (Action Aid 2017). Even though women dominate the informal sector workforce, their issues are still not resolved and their work is persistently undervalued. Thus, within informal employment, their wages are tendentially lower than that of men.

Women working in the informal sector of the economy, or, as informal labour in factories/the formal sector, often perform menial jobs which are low-paid and are relegated as unskilled. The sole purpose of such women to participate in such low waged jobs is to support their families financially. At times, the women working in such precarious conditions are the only earning member of nearly 50 percent of the families (Action Aid 2017). Hence, they settle for any job regardless of what wage they are paid. Furthermore, if we closely look upon the structure of the informal sector, we see how exploitive it is for the women who work in this sector. Their work is neither acknowledged legally, i.e., properly and consistently documented by state authorities, nor is their labour acknowledged by the society at large. This has perpetuated a condition wherein such women workers are exposed to unfixed/unregulated working hours; low wages; denial of leave, stipulated rest periods, non-wage benefits; and are often victims of sexual assaults at the hands of middlemen, contractors and the likes (Action Aid 2017).

The fact that women comprise the majority of the workforce in the informal sector in India is also matched by the fact that the bulk of these women workers are unorganized. Only a small proportion of approximately 7.5 per cent are availing the membership of authentic registered trade unions, which would provide them with certain benefits along with their rights.

The plight of self-employed women is also the same. Most of the women workers lack proper training. Some non-profit organizations such as self-help groups (SHGs) do work for the empowerment of informal women workers, especially the self-employed workers. Even some trade unions are emerging from the ranks of informal women workers. Nevertheless, apart from the aid from SHGs, women informal workers have very few options to avail as far as gainful jobs are concerned. The quiet contributors to the effortless movement of the social carriage, the women workers engaged in the informal sector are poor, perhaps poorest amongst the poor. This discrimination results in decline in the participation of women in economic activities other than construction work, domestic labour work and the work in garment or tobacco factories. The status of the women in the informal sector is undermined and unrecognised. They are even prone to sexual assault at workplaces, which might be prolonged because these women informal workers choose to remain silent due to the fear of unemployment and no wages. It is a vicious cycle that perpetuates poverty and exploitation (Breman 2020).

In this backdrop, recent studies and news reports have revealed grave details about the plight of informal workers at larger, and women informal workers and self-employed women in particular. March 24, 2020 had a crushing impact on informal workers. The sudden and ill-planned lockdown by the central government was pronounced on the evening of March 24, leading eventually to a job loss of about 400 million informal sector workers as per the International Labour Organization (ILO Report 2020). Due to the lockdown, several economic activities came to a standstill, and both the formal and the informal sector experienced a catastrophic economic ruin. While middle-class professionals resumed work through the 'work from home' provision and sections of the formal sector workforce in essential services continued to work, scores of informal workers lost their means of livelihood, and therefore, the only means through which they could have provided their families succour – something for which they had left their villages.

The unplanned implementation of a lockdown in a country where anywhere between 92 to 94 per cent of the workforce work is trapped in informal employment, unleashed complete havoc and a huge humanitarian crisis. The ill execution of the lockdown by the central government culminated in the exodus of these informal workers – most of whom were migrants. As noted by Ravi Srivastava (2020), the Indian economy is plagued by the growing ranks of informal workers, comprising mostly of circular migrant labour. The informality of labour and circulation of migrants in labour markets is in fact consciously used to raise profits

of Indian capitalists as it leaves ample room for cutting down on wage costs. Notably, migrant labour has no fixed relation with the place of work due to the lack of accommodation at worksite, irregular wages, etc. However, ties with their native place are also being gradually eroded with continuous migration and due to rampant agrarian distress that closes down avenues of succour/shelter. Nonetheless, as the uncertainty of lockdown spread from the initial 21 days declared on 24 March 2020, migrant workers tried desperately to reach their native villages. These workers – many of whom were accompanied by family members – began leaving the cities on foot, on rented cycles, cement mixers trucks, etc. due to the inter-state border restrictions. As noted by the renowned sociologist and labour historian, Jan Breman (2020): “Home has become a sparse and poverty-stricken waiting room at the village margins or the city’s outskirts, a halt to pass the quarantine that keeps them isolated from the realms of civil society.”

Claims were made by the various governments about the provision of free ration and cash transfers for informal workers who were denied wages by their contractors and were left unemployed. Sadly, the cash transfers that were made were solely for one month, and several complained of not even receiving the benefits of these cash transfers and free ration facilities (ISST 2020). The heavy amount relief package of Rs. 20 Lakh Crore, which was announced by the Central government did not even include the requirements of the basic amenities of these informal workers. The notices issued by the government that no contractor will remove workers from their jobs and that a rent moratorium was to be extended to informal workers living in cities, were hardly enforced. These initiatives were only on paper as such claims made by the government have been seriously negated by ground-level surveys and investigative reports.

According to a survey report by the Centre of Equity Studies (2020), the share of women reporting job losses was higher relative to men during the lockdown. Many women in the informal sector reported that their income was reduced owing to the lockdown, and many did not even receive the wages for the work that they had performed. Women workers were worst affected than male workers because in terms of paid employment, women tend to work in risky, hazardous and stigmatized jobs as waste-pickers, domestic workers, etc. Informal women workers in the garment and tobacco industries were coerced to work with either low or zero wages for extra hours in the production and the assembly of the products, along with zero social security. The situation was equally grim in the construction industry, which came to a grinding halt in the lockdown period, and triggered severe unemployment plus rampant denial

of pre-lockdown period wages. Women workers in this industry are known to expend much physical labour. Apart from being physically laborious work, the industry is notorious for denying the bulk of migrant labourers their due minimum wages and prescribed social security benefits. The contractors denied even the salary of the month of March 2020, to women workers. With a partial lifting of the lockdown, it was only men who began to be recruited back by construction agencies.

Women working as domestic workers were also abandoned by employers for whom they worked relentlessly. Several such domestic workers were single earners, single mothers, abandoned wives, divorcees or widows. Even when the lockdown was lifted and residential complexes slowly opened up to re-employ domestic workers, the protocols laid down by Resident Welfare Associations proved onerous and irrational with some complexes compelling impoverished, desperate domestic workers to get themselves tested for COVID-19, submit blood tests, etc (Dayal 2020).

Moving reports of urban poor women who struggled to survive as they lost their livelihood are detailed in recent studies, and are worth quoting. The report by the Centre for Equity Studies (2020), titled *Labouring Lives*, mentions the following instances of informal women workers:

Sonia used to work in a cosmetic factory in Delhi earning less than 5000 rupees a month. Her husband was an alcoholic and abandoned her and her three kids. The Lockdown added an entirely new dimension to her stress. With no work and no pay, there have been days when she has failed to feed her kids since the lockdown. **Aziza** and her two kids were also abandoned. Before the lockdown she used to work at a tailoring unit in rural UP earning a meagre 2000 rupees a month. The onset of the lockdown led to her skipping meals regularly for this family. To provide full means for her kids, she is forced to skip her meals. *Both Sonia and Aziza have not received any support from the government in terms of ration, cooked food, or money.* **Reshma**, a widow, and mother of six children has been struggling to provide for her family during the lockdown in a village in Haryana. She is in desperate need of help since it has been really difficult for her to feed her children. Being a construction worker, she would earn less than 5000 a month, which was less than her male counterparts whose average income varied from 8000-10000 rupees a month. She pointed out there is absolutely no work for women in this lockdown at her place. It is also observed that women belonging to the socially disadvantaged or backward classes of the society have been pushed further into deprivation. Although the pandemic was universal, the already existing inequalities deteriorated the situation for Dalit women, the Adivasi women and the Muslim women. The lockdown left these women belonging to already disadvantaged groups with no opportunities of employment thus leading to the perpetuation of poverty amongst them.

Another vulnerable segment has been self-employed women workers. These women suffered greatly despite being self-employed since transportation and regular movement was tremendously scaled down, the supply of raw materials reduced, and there were limited means for the procurement of these raw materials by these women. Moreover, most such self-employed women did not receive any moratorium on loans taken for local, micro enterprises, as elaborated by Ritu Dewan (2021) in a recent interview. This led to the disruption of the cycle of work for the self-employed women workers.

SEWA Bharat's survey highlights women in the informal sector, ranging from domestic and home-based workers to street vendors and waste-pickers, and their concerns during the lockdown. Majority of the concerns these women have, are pertaining to the ongoing financial crisis, with 17 per cent of the respondents claiming to have used up their savings due to loss in income; reporting that these savings too, shall run out in the long term. Primary concerns regarding basic commodities include food scarcity, lack of medicine and the issue of rent. The struggle to provide one meal a day for the family burdens women, while others reportedly have barricaded themselves in their homes, out of fear of being thrown out by the landlords. Payment of loans was a concern many raised, as most did not even have the income to provide for services such as mobile recharges, protection kits, sanitary products, etc. The mental health of women has reportedly also been impacted by the situation rendering them idle and jobless; the added tension of long-term job loss creating stress and frustration. The lockdown requirements of social distancing also proved to be a cause of concern. For a large number of urban poor living in crowded slums with little water supply, governmental instructions on social distancing and maintenance of hygiene were nothing but a cruel joke (John 2020).

(e) Questionable policies

In a critical study of the measures taken by the centre and various states, Ravi Srivastava questions the logic by which: (i) destination states prohibited movement of workers so as to supposedly mitigate losses in terms of exodus of capital from these states and, (ii) receiving states resisted return of migrants by claiming the 'inability' to absorb their labour in saturated labour markets, and by arguing about the spread of the disease. He goes on to argue that given the rural-urban wage differentials and lack of stability in supply work in the rural areas, the mismatch between labour supply and demand is temporary. It is also imperative for employers and states to implement strategies for decent work so that improved living conditions can be

attained. Policy suggestions in circulation include the addressal of the prevailing labour market segmentation with registration and formalisation of the workforce, and greater job security for informal workers, including for circular migrants. Unfortunately, the Indian state has so far moved in a reverse direction, removing existing labour and employment protections. There is an immediate requirement for the institution of a social protection floor for all workers and income transfer for a few months to compensate informal workers for their income losses during lockdown. The Standard Operations Protocol (SOP) enabled industries to resume their work in a growing ambience of several state governments relaxing statutory labour laws to the detriment of workers, and in a context wherein several migrant poor simply sought to avoid the contagion by returning to their native villages. Expectedly, the mismatch of state policy and workers' interests resulted in numerous protests by workers (John, 2020).

In her interview on the relief delivered by the new Union budget of 2021, the noted feminist economist, Professor Ritu Dewan, highlighted an increase in what she calls "Gender De-Equalization". According to her, the 2021 Budget, in particular, has caused all the achievements acquired by promoters of gender equality to be reversed. She rightly elaborated on how the Indian government announced special ordinances that relaxed labour laws at a time when workers' interests needed to be upholstered; how crucial schemes like *Ujwala* were discontinued, thereby enhancing women's unpaid work component; how crucial health and nutrition programs saw a fall in budget allocation, etc.

In its defence, it is not uncommon to find state agencies quoting special provisions for furthering of the country's gender equality index. However, it is to be noted that the lion share of government policies is usually implemented for women employees in the *organised* sector, whereas policies for informal workers remain in theory (Samantroy, Sarkar & Pradhan 2021). Wage parity is a plaguing issue, with women informal workers in particular facing overexploitation, unsafe work environments, as well as disproportionate access to social services that compels them to push down the costs of social reproduction of their impoverished families through performance of higher and higher quantum of unpaid work (Samantroy, Sarkar & Pradhan 2021).

It is in this backdrop of scholarship that we will be examining experiences of specific segments of working women.

Methodology

It has been our endeavour to document *differential* as well as some *common* experiences of working women, who are positioned in different kinds of industries or at different points in the production and supply chain. For this purpose, we have focused on what is generally considered a *formal* sector industry, such as garment production, as well *informal* sectors like construction and paid domestic service. In addition to drawing on secondary literature on these concerned industries as well as the impact of the pandemic-cum-lockdown, our research has also given equal weight to fieldwork, which was used to verify insights available in the given literature.

Our fieldwork and corroboration of the lockdown-triggered acute distress within lower rungs of the labour market has been consciously anchored on those sectors which have traditionally been associated with growing informality in work relations, and have been adversely affected by reduced regulation of employer–employee relations by the state. Further, as the female workforce in India is also characterized by a component of self-employed women and small-scale entrepreneurs – many of whom constantly move between a self-employed status and actual waged work due to the ups-and-downs of the capitalist market – we included in our sample data the experiences of self-employed women.

This apart, our study strove to document the experiences of working women, who remained in continuous employment during lockdown periods as frontline workers. While the term ‘frontline workers’ cannot be restricted to the strict definition outlined in the Disaster Management Act; more so when we consider how a significant number of workers like full-time live-in domestic workers, sanitary workers, factory workers in essential services, etc. have continued to work during lockdowns and severe ‘unlock restrictions’, we sought to gather the experiences of frontline healthcare workers identified under the said piece of legislation. For this purpose, we focused on documenting the experiences of nurses whose continuous services in hospitals have been crucial in combatting the pandemic. The decision to focus on nurses stemmed not only from the fact that such frontline health workers are predominantly women, but also from our attempt to prioritize that segment of healthcare professionals which is usually overlooked, given the tendency of the hospital system to undervalue nursing and to pedestalize doctors.

Locating the current plight of important segments of the female workforce within the context of the pre-pandemic period and longer tradition of hyper-exploitation and rampant

oppression, led us to a serious engagement with the work and perspectives of noted subject experts, government officials and workers' leaders. We, thus, interviewed well-known scholars who have been working on trends in female workforce participation and on the industries central to our research project. Likewise, we interviewed labour department officials and trade unionists in the bid to corroborate official assessments, as well as to read these against the backdrop of vocal criticism of neo-liberal labour policies by the trade union movement. Our study was further enriched by drawing on the everyday experiences of workers themselves. Unfortunately, the second surge of COVID-19 cases restricted our data collection and prevented field visits that would have allowed a larger sampling of garment, construction and domestic workers.

Notably, as part of our methodological approach, it was felt that tracing the experiences from the education sector was also imperative. More than an important employer of women's labour, the education sector proved significant for our research in terms of mapping the reproduction of prevailing class, caste, gender and other inequalities during pandemic times – a process that ultimately determines the entry of individuals into the existing, highly segmented and hierarchical labour market. In this regard, our fieldwork and analysis centred itself on the impact of online learning in a context of pre-existing educational inequalities.

Chapters

Apart from this overview chapter, the project report comprises of five separate chapters, in addition to a conclusion. Each of these chapters is the work of select individual project team members, who took the responsibility of examining relevant secondary literature and pursuing dedicated fieldwork on specific segments of the workforce and on certain aspects that enrich our understanding of the complex repercussions of the pandemic-triggered lockdown.

The first chapter is titled 'Working Women, Employment Stresses, and Household Dynamics During the Lockdown,' and is authored by Jolynne John. It provides an outline of generalized experiences of working women who have juggled either with intensified work rhythms during the past year, or with loss of livelihood and resulting economic pressures. The chapter also highlights the specificities of experiences reported by frontline health workers and the assessments of inadequate gender budgeting with respect to the post-pandemic Union Budget announced in February 2021. The second chapter is titled 'The Price of Fashion: An Overview of Women Workers in the Garment Industry,' and is authored by Archita Agarwal.

This chapter outlines the vulnerable condition of women garment workers prior to and post the pandemic-cum-lockdown. The structure of the garment industry, important changes in the industry, the recruitment practices pertaining to women workers, the average working conditions, and the heightened distress ushered in by the lockdown and long spell of unemployment have been laid out in this chapter using extensive secondary literature as well as by drawing on detailed interviews with workers and a subject expert.

The third chapter is titled ‘The COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown: Domestic Workers and their Plight,’ and is the work of Anna Sara Baby, Vedika Sharma and Sanskriti Bhandari. It is a detailed overview of the peculiarities of the domestic services industry, and the marked challenges faced by this large informal workforce since the pandemic set in. Their outline of important scholarship on India’s domestic workers is backed by fieldwork carried out with the assistance of domestic workers of Delhi-NCR and Kerala. The fourth chapter is titled ‘Construction Workers in India and their Grief-stricken Exodus Post Lockdown,’ and is authored by Sandhya Jeremiah D. Dung. The chapter engages with highly informal and exploitative nature of workrelation in the industry, the gender pay gap when it comes to women construction workers, and the glaring inadequacies of existing labour legislations and policies on building and construction workers. Apart from fieldwork comprising of interactions with a labour department official, the chapter also brings to light the ground realities as exposed by a trade unionist from Delhi Nirman Mazdoor Sangharsh Samiti and numerous reports which have documented the voice of construction workers. The last of fieldwork-based chapters is titled ‘Lockdowns and Online Learning: Educational Inequalities Magnified,’ which is authored by Soumya Jha, Vedika Sharma, Sanskriti Bhandari and Jolynne John. This chapter documents the reinforcement of educational inequalities with the closure of schools and universities during the ensuing COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting push towards online learning and digitization. The strength of the chapter lies in its pointed focus on the most marginalized sections of students in the university education system; namely, women from rural and urban poor backgrounds, from ‘lower’ caste groups, and from the crumbling open and distance learning mode.

Working Women, Employment Stresses, and Household Dynamics During the Lockdown

Jolynne John, IInd year English Honours

An overview

With the lockdown initiated in March 2020 due to the spread of the novel Coronavirus, it was clear that the former work routines and norms of society were about to be changed dramatically. Within unfolding changes, an aspect that came across quite strongly was the *differential* impact of the lockdown on the lives of many. As a large social group, it has been observed that women were faced with more unpaid work due to restructured work regimens of household members, and were overall confronted with heightened burden/oppression. Nonetheless, women are far from a homogenous category and differential experiences are expected even among women, especially given that they hail from various class/economic backgrounds, regions, cultures, occupations, backgrounds and societal positions.

The lockdown in 2020 brought a number of consequences – though varying in quantum and extent of the impact – for women all over the country. Job losses, reduced wages/salaries, increasing burden of care work and rising domestic violence were some of the repercussions reported in the news and micro studies. Needless to say, we can expect similar developments to be unfolding during the lockdowns imposed in several states in 2021 as well.

With factories and workplaces shut down, millions of migrant workers – many of whom were women – had to deal with the loss of income, food shortages and uncertainty about their future. Scores of migrant poor walked or cycled back to their native villages. Out of these, many were women who were particularly vulnerable. With little food and water, they walked for hundreds of kilometres, often nursing little children, and braving violence unleashed by the police and local authorities.

What often causes women to be at risk in these unforeseen circumstances is that work, both within and beyond the home, is a highly gendered process. The country has one of the highest pay gaps between men and women in the world. Additionally, women in India, especially from socially and economically marginalized groups, are trapped in low or unpaid, irregular and unsafe jobs. They are concentrated in what many identify as the informal, casual work. A sizeable component of women is also self-employed (Mazumdar 2018: 21-24). By and

large casual women workers and self-employed women are not part of the country's growth story (Vasudevan 2020).

Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017-18 reveals that manufacturing workers constituted the single largest occupation for the female work force in urban areas. This was followed by textile and garment workers, food processing, tobacco products (beedi workers) and leather goods. Teachers constituted another big component. Another large component are domestic workers followed by women as salespersons, housekeeping and restaurant services workers, clerks etc.

Increased levels of care work and domestic violence due to the lockdown

Amongst the pressures of the pandemic, many women now had to bear the increased responsibility of managing a household without being paid and were often subjected to domestic violence.

A community podcast titled "Local Diaries" hosted by Meera Jatav, Priyanka and Rizwana Tabassum recorded in one of their episodes 'Aaram ka Haq', the stories of several women living through the lockdown and noted that:

Women tell us just how much care work they continue to carry out: work that our economic models are content to leave uncounted, unpaid and unvalued. Women continue to juggle paid employment and unpaid caring responsibilities, and in the time of a pandemic that is taking a great toll on so many (Jatav et al 2020).

The sexual division of labour has led to the burden of unpaid housework falling disproportionately on women. Shiney Chakaraborty who made the use of a variety of assessment studies aptly points out: *"It was found that the unequal gendered division of domestic chores existed even before the onset of the pandemic, but the COVID-19 induced lockdowns have further worsened the situation"* (Chakaraborty 2020).

Likewise, we have an insightful study by the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), which interviewed 176 women working in informal arrangements during the lockdown. Out of those surveyed, 66 per cent reported an increase in household chores, and 36 per cent stated an increased burden of child and elderly care work during this period. Furthermore, daughters are also doing more than sons. In some cases, they even dropped out of school. As traditional caregivers, most roles played by women are not considered as contributors to the economy.

An article published by Priyanshi Chauhan highlights how, in the case of women professionals, with the closure of offices and educational institutions, and the emerging norm of work from home and online education, along with the lack of services of domestic workers, the need to perform unpaid chores in the household has increased (Chauhan, 2020). Simultaneously, the requirements of social distancing and sanitization have created higher quantum of unpaid work. This apart, women currently unemployed or with relatively lower salaries face the onus of making enough money to run their household and often face aggression displayed by their husbands or men in the family rendered unemployed by the lockdown.

In fact, COVID-19 has caused an increase in cases of domestic and gender-based violence, assault and humiliation not just in India, but all over the world. On April 6, 2020, Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women refers to the growing incidents of violence against women as a ‘shadow pandemic, signalling a profoundly ingrained ‘culture of misogyny’ across nations. In India, the National Commission for Women (NCW) raised an urgent alert about the increasing number of domestic violence cases since the lockdown began. In July 2020, the NCW received 2,914 complaints of crimes committed against women (Gupta, 2020).

It was noted that this surge is primarily due to unpaid and unequal domestic labour along with alcohol consumption and substance abuse. In response to this, the Kerala government and the NCW have launched a WhatsApp number to report domestic violence. Several NGOs and Helplines have been operating 24 hours to help or counsel victims of domestic violence. However, getting access to a phone and calling for help or reporting violence also proves to be a challenge.

The readings used in this literature review, hence, point out how unemployment continues with the pandemic and how women bear the brunt of enhanced unpaid domestic work, domestic violence and growing social alienation under lockdown scenarios. In this regard, state policies seem to be vastly inefficient in addressing deepening gender inequality and wider social inequities, as was well encapsulated not only in the ‘COVID relief package’ of 2020, but also in the Union Budget announced in February 2021.

Limitations of the 2021 Union Budget in addressing key gender-based issues in the post lockdown context

Women's rights activists have often pointed out how the 'Gender Responsive Budget' released every year leaves out key schemes that cater to women. For many, India's Union Budget of 2021 was expected to go beyond minimal allocations towards women in the household and address bigger issues and inequalities faced by women regarding health, livelihoods and education that have worsened by the pandemic. While it does offer some substantial allocations, in other avenues it appears to be lacking.

This year, the gender budget is just 4.3 per cent of the total budget outlay – hence below than the 4.7 per cent of 2020-21 (Pitre 2021). The allocation for Women Specific Schemes has fallen meaning it has cut back on various schemes that would directly benefit women which were in fact expected to increase significantly to address the many losses and rise in gender inequalities faced by women in both the organised and unorganised sectors with the COVID crisis.

The outlay for women-specific schemes in the Women and Child Development Ministry saw a reduction of 15 per cent (Rao 2021). The budget outlay under the 'Mission for Protection and Empowerment of Women' saw a drastic cutback to INR 48 crore as compared to INR 901 crore in 2019-20 and INR 1,163 crore in 2020-21 (Pitre 2021). There is no allocation for 'One Stop Centres'. i.e., a major government programme to address violence against women, other helplines and shelter homes. The ASHA and Anganwadi workers who have been risking their own safety and putting in long hours of extreme care and service during the pandemic are not recognised by the government as workers at all. Hence, the budget sees no mention of any incentives or revenues being generated for their service.

Fieldwork and data collection

With regard to all the data pertaining to women workers, employment stresses and household dynamics mentioned above, it was necessary to perform some field work to gain first-hand information about the differential impact of the lockdown. Interviews with subject experts/feminist scholars and working women in different occupations were accordingly conducted to document experiences which could verify what has been highlighted in the existing literature about the gender dimensions of the lockdown in 2020.

The structured / semi-structured interviews were conducted telephonically since the ongoing pandemic limited our ability to physically meet and gather information. As the topic covered here exists within a broader scheme and cannot be narrowed down to a particular demographic or employment space, the sample collected consisted of working women from different fields, regions and economic backgrounds. Moreover, this was done to pose and verify important questions of the sharpened inequalities, and to rightly capture as much of the differential impact of the lockdown as we could.

Apart from two noted feminist economists who have been studying workforce participation trends of women and state policies, our field work entailed interactions with working women. Our sample consisted of three nurses; one who was employed in a privately owned hospital, one employed in a government hospital and one employed in a government hospital designated as a 'COVID centre'. Our sample also included a self-employed vendor in Manipur and a daily wage cleaning staff in Jesus and Mary College. The reasons for this choice of sample also stand with reference to our purpose.

For one, it was essential to talk to women in the frontline of managing the pandemic, i.e., nurses on COVID-19 duty for whom the pandemic-cum-lockdown meant an increase in the amount of workload and risk. Being employed in *different kinds* of hospitals, however, did mean that each of their circumstances varied. They all reported a markedly differential experience, with the principal reason being the difference in the place of employment and nature of their tenure.

Since there is a large number of self-employed workers in the country, their experience needed to be tapped as well. Further, our study took into account the difference in region, and hence, we traced down a self-employed working woman who is a small shop-owner at a local women's market in Manipur. Given the politics behind militarization in the state of Manipur, the different rules of lockdown like lengthier and more stringent restrictions on movement, were also factored in.

Finally, a daily wage woman worker, part of another large section of informal workers in our country that is often mistreated and which has borne the brunt of ill-managed lockdowns, was interviewed. Similar to the self-employed worker, information was gathered on how she managed to make ends meet with everything closed down.

With regard to increase in emotional and physical stress due to the unforeseen circumstances of the times, the experience of all these women stands to be more or less the same. Of course, the differential impact outweighs the similarities, which was a fact that was well collaborated even in our limited field work.

Fieldwork analysis

(a) Subject experts

In an interaction with Dr. Neetha N, former Director of the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, it was asserted that in terms of what happened with the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, it was clear that there was crystallization of the already existing problems within the sectors that had long been informal and unorganized. For instance, domestic workers were denied access to their employer households, and consequently, lost their livelihood. Many grew indebted. Though there were some cases where an informal understanding had been reached that they would still be paid during the lockdown period, but studies and research shows that in most cases this did not happen and many were forced to trickle back to their native villages. Overall, some migrant informal workers, however, continued to stay back because of lack of employment opportunities back home. Lack of income led to many informal workers being harassed by landlords in the city as they were unable to pay rent.

The situation post-lockdown in 2020 did not necessarily prove to be ideal as well. This was a point eloquently asserted by Professor Ritu Dewan, Vice President of the Indian Society of Labour Economics, with respect to her study of the 2021 Union Budget and its vast limitations. Professor Dewan clearly observed how there has been an increase in what she calls "Gender De-Equalization", definitively reflected in the concerns of our other interviewees. She quoted a lot of data to prove how the process of de-equalization had already started before the pandemic; largely due to the skewed policies and financial resource management of the Indian state. State policies have left unreversed the kinds of dangerous trends repeatedly reflected in data acquired from labour force participation reports before the pandemic-cum-lockdown. Such data has shown that India has the lowest female workforce participation in urban and rural sectors, in not only South Asia, but Asia Pacific as well. Moreover, gender gap in wages and paid employment participation have increased dramatically; growth rates have been long falling; and there was an overall decline in employment rates in the country before March 2020.

Even recent research at the Azim Premji University likewise indicates a double blow for women. Not only were women seven times more likely than men to lose their jobs during the lockdown, but they were also eleven times more likely than men to not return to work thereafter. All of these issues were well established before the pandemic and with its onset, only worsened it.

Contextualizing the Union Budget of 2021-22, Professor Dewan highlighted that this budget was being ushered in while the country is still undergoing the harsh effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP), for example, has seen the sharpest decline since 1952, and is likely to shrink further. Further, inequalities along class, caste, gender dimensions have been increased far beyond what could have been imagined. With this as the backdrop, the Union Budget was expected to repair the suffering economy and address further key issues. However, what was released was far from satisfactory gender budgeting as various avenues of development that should have been prioritized were not.

For instance, in the social sector what was allocated was much lower funds than what is needed in terms of budgetary support. The health sector had been suffering from weak infrastructure, human resource and expenditure shortage even before COVID-19. And the pandemic only made it worse. Despite this, the strengthening of primary healthcare infrastructure, such as through the National Health Mission and Anganwadi Services, is not among this Budget's priorities. Moreover, there is insufficient funding when it comes to nutrition in the country as well. Even before the pandemic, India accounted for a third of the global burden of malnutrition. Nutrition got further disrupted in reduction in essential nutrition services and food security due to the pandemic.

Further, Professor Dewan noted that the recent Union Budget brought about the merging of schemes which is going to make it difficult to seek accountability for progress and keep track of every scheme that provides important services to varied age groups. A number of schemes have been clubbed together, despite not being particularly correlated as a way of not prioritizing either of them. Allocations towards health have been changed to Health and Wellbeing, which has led to bizarre incorporations like that of roads, water and air pollution etc. into the overall Health system's indices.

Economically, the agriculture sector was one of the few economic activities that were not completely suspended, hence it experienced growth. This year however, the sector received

quite low budgetary support. There was also a reduction of funds allocated to the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan), a major Centrally Sponsored Scheme, to INR 10,000 crores in 2021-22 as compared to last year's Budget Estimates. Allied sectors, on which a number of marginal farmers depend on for income like fisheries, animal husbandry, dairy, education and research have also been neglected.

Notably, gender budgetary systems tend to focus on welfare and empowerment. The Gender Budget Statement has two parts: Part A, which enlists schemes that are meant exclusively for women, and Part B, which includes schemes where at least 30 per cent of the expenditure is directed towards benefiting women. While the overall gender budget increased by 6.9%, due to increase in allocations of Part B Schemes like National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) etc., the allocations for Part A saw a significant decrease. According to Professor Dewan, the reduction in the Part A women specific schemes of the gender budget reflects the current regressive gender binaries in our country. Employment generation for women was not given as much significance. Moreover, the Budget saw no mention of the Anganwadi Workers.

As per Professor Dewan's observations, at least 22 per cent of female workers are still out of work and little attention is paid to designing policies to address their needs. The so-called COVID-19 Relief package announced in May 2020 did not seem to reach any of those populations who were in most need of it; whether they were domestic workers, frontline health workers, workers of MSMEs, etc.

(b) Frontline health workers

For all three of our nurse respondents, there was an increased amount of workload. Neither of them had ever served during a pandemic nor experienced the challenges that came with it. From their daily personal life to their work sphere, changes that they could have never imagined began occurring. While these are some general experiences that can be drawn out from their responses, the differences stand out with regard to the hospitals they worked at. Stark differences between working conditions in privately-owned and government-owned hospitals, and the response of these institutions in managing a pandemic, were observed. Importantly, the two nurses in the government-owned hospitals were in permanent employment, whereas the nurse in the private hospital was a contractual staff.

In the government-owned COVID hospital where Nurse Seema is employed,⁶ the hospital was quite efficient when it came to constituting and enforcing important protocols and guidelines. It was a time of pressure for everyone in the beginning, for instance, the regular use of PPE kits and the discomfort that came with it. Quite a number of people actually fainted after wearing it for a long number of hours. Another major change was the patient and doctor/nurse relationship being vastly different now. The same level of interaction as before could not take place. Anyone not complying with the safety guidelines had strict actions taken against them. Tests and sanitization protocols were undertaken on a regular basis. Nurse Swati experienced a similar situation in the state-owned hospital where she worked. While right in the beginning it had been difficult to get hold of masks and PPE kits, due to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, eventually all safety measures, including PPE kits, masks, gloves etc. were provided.

Meanwhile Nurse Deepa, formerly employed at a privately-owned hospital, struggled with a hostile working conditions due to the high-handed approach of the authorities. She stated that private hospitals in Delhi-NCR paid almost no heed to the concerns and safety of their workers. The hospital where she worked informed the staff in the beginning that they would be provided masks and PPE kits. However, the mask given to them was not a surgical one but a cloth one that they had to wear for the next 15 days. Moreover, they were not allowed to ask for more. Despite continued requests, Nurse Deepa and her colleagues were not given extra masks or PPE kits by the hospital in the times when COVID-19 cases were on a rise daily. Their superiors made them sign statements that they were only going to be given the one. Nurse Deepa also recounted how one day due to the wind her mask fell off somewhere and she could not acquire it back. Asking the hospital for another was a very heavy task. At the time, masks were not available in the markets. She had to send a letter to the hospital (one that she has held on till today) for her to be given such an essential object. They later charged her 15 rupees for a mask, despite her putting her life at risk every day.

For all three of our nurse respondents, the lack of transport services during the lockdown made conveyance to their workplace difficult. However, in Nurse Seema's hospital such daily transport services were eventually provided in the form of buses that plied along certain routes. Nonetheless, the hospital staffers who did not live along those routes had to

⁶ Names of the nurses have been changed and names of the hospitals eschewed so as to protect the identity of respondents.

figure out other means. The hospital, however, did provide some remedy by allowing staff to stay in hotels and hostels for free till their duties got over.

Nurse Deepa's situation in a private hospital was greatly different since no daily transport was not provided. The hospital was about 15-20 km from her house, and every day she used to hope to avail of a bus or rickshaw to reach on time. With everything closed down and standing alone on an empty road, she often faced harassment, eve-teasing and lewd comments from men passing by. The staff made further requests for hostels to be arranged for them because commuting every day after a whole day's work was not easy. The hospital never undertook this either. Importantly, according to Nurse Deepa, about 50 per cent of female nurses are not from Delhi, but primarily from Kerala, Haryana and Jharkhand. They faced major issues as they live on rent in the city. Furthermore, in many private hospitals, like where Nurse Deepa was employed, the nursing staff faced a delay in the disbursement of their salaries, in addition to low salaries that were not revised in the pandemic context.

As per changes within their household dynamics, Nurse Seema and Nurse Deepa stated that since they are unmarried, they did not feel the burden of domestic work as much as their mothers or other females in the family. For Nurse Swati, though unmarried, there was a dramatic increase in household work which she had to take up after a long day at the hospital. Importantly, all three of our healthcare professionals were of the view that their married colleagues faced quite a number of challenges. Women had to pay attention to their children too, especially single mothers. Some of their female colleagues were pregnant as well during 'COVID duty', and a few contracted 'Covid' as well during their pregnancy; leading to a lot of complications. The nurses shared that many families pressurized serving nurses into leaving their jobs to manage the household.

In terms of availing of a support system, Nurse Seema and Nurse Swati claimed to have found ample comfort in their family's company. Although families of the nurses were naturally concerned about their safety during 'Covid duties', they realised the responsibilities that these nurses carried as healthcare professionals. It was tough, according to our nurse respondents, to keep themselves isolated whenever they returned home from a long shift. Moreover, neighbours of both Nurse Seema and Nurse Swati were anything but supportive and preferred to keep away from them. For Nurse Deepa, things continued to be rough. Her family put constant pressure on her to quit her job as she faced several risks each day; not only the virus

but even getting home safely at night. After seeing the way that the hospital treated its employees, her family all the more insisted on her quitting the job.

With regard to their salaries, all three of our healthcare professionals faced challenges. Though she was given her regular salary, Nurse Seema's medical leaves were cut causing her much distress and limiting her ability to take care of her family. In Nurse Swati's case, it was noted that since the onset of the pandemic, the Dearness Allowance (an enhanced allowance provided every six months) has not been provided to any government employees at the hospital, which has proven to be difficult. Meanwhile, Nurse Deepa reported getting the rawest deal. Despite giving her resignation back in August 2020, she has not been paid her dues for certain months of service at the hospital. Since the hospital could not pay everyone's salary, only a handful members of the staff received an increment and were kept on whereas others were made to forcibly resign. When attempting to fight against the authorities, the staff shockingly received threats everyday of cases being filed against them or never receiving their letters of recommendation and experience.

In light of this information, several facts became quite apparent. All three nurses made it a point to note that the situation in large government hospitals in Delhi-NCR has been relatively better compared to the average private hospital in the city. Though Nurse Swati and Nurse Seema belong to the same profession, their place of employment and permanent tenures still worked in ways wherein their certain basic labour rights were protected during challenging times. This was not the case in several private hospitals where nurses like Deepa were denied timely remuneration and adequate safety gear. Thus, the impact of the lockdown was spread unevenly within women of the same occupational grade.

(c) Self-employed woman vendor

Our study also involved examining the experiences of a self-employed woman. For this, we focused on a different region altogether. Our respondent was Mrs. Gracey, a self-employed small-scale vendor in a local women's market in Imphal district of Manipur. Mrs. Gracey owned a small shop in this market. For her the lockdown ushered in a lot of concern. Amongst safety for her family, she also worried about her business, as well as the acquirement of essential items before they sold out. For small shop owners like Mrs. Gracey the biggest concern was making ends meet. None of the items in her small clothing shop were selling like they used to since people prioritized buying essential items, and so clothes did not seem vital.

Even when restrictions became slightly relaxed, there were always a smaller number of customers.

In an attempt to raise her income a month after lockdown was imposed, she tried to sell vegetables in her locality. That, however, was not a stable source of income generation either. Eventually she had to close down her stall in the market altogether. She now has a small shop attached to her house where she sells vegetables and other items. Many self-employed women like Mrs. Gracey had to take loans at a time when repayment was almost impossible. Most self-employed women workers are underrepresented when it comes to the country's economic growth; resulting in a situation wherein they are hardly provided with any sort of concessions. (Abraham, Shibu, 2019). Despite the closure of her clothes shop, her family was visited by bank employees demanding their money back, but it was often beyond her capacity, due to the lack of income and high rates of interest.

Household dynamics changed for Mrs. Gracey as well. Adding to the burden of repaying loans, her household and domestic burden increased significantly too. This put forward a number of challenges in her relationship with her husband. It was mostly the finances that gave them both quite a lot of trouble and bred frequent tensions between them.

(d) *A daily wager*

Our final respondent was Ms. Manisha, a daily wage worker employed as cleaning staff at Jesus and Mary College, who faced her own set of challenges during the lockdown in 2020. The lockdown made her quite anxious about not only her job but also her husband's unemployment as a construction worker. Moreover, she was worried if they would be able to afford the room, they had rented to live in. She said that they took small loans from people they knew, including their landlord, and somehow managed to cope.

Ms. Manisha was among the several women employed in daily wage work who found it difficult to manage with their minimum wages and less amount of daily work. The college administration continued to pay them their salaries and had in fact started calling the cleaning staff in May 2020. However, she was not able to go as she was stuck in Gurgaon where there was unavailability of public transport, and so she could not travel to college. She could report to work only from July 2020. Surviving on her salary as a daily-wager proved difficult for her family, and that caused immense stress within the household.

In terms of educating her school-going children, Ms. Manisha again reported much hardship. Her elder daughter who is in the ninth grade, attends a government school. During the lockdown and before senior grades opened for direct teaching-learning, her elder daughter had online classes, which she attended through the *one phone* that the family had. Meanwhile, her younger daughter, who is in the fifth grade, did *not* attend classes at all.

Conclusion

What is evident from our interactions with working women is how much economic backgrounds determined the effects of the lockdown on their work life and household relations. Both Mrs. Gracey and Ms. Manisha were compelled to take loans and struggled to make ends meet. They were unsure of whether they would even have a livelihood in the near future. In this way, work and employment became huge causes of concern for women during the lockdown, especially when women's incomes were already a crucial component of family earnings/sustenance. The differing economic backgrounds of our respondents, and their positioning in the highly graded labour market effectively determined the amount of distress that they faced.

The lockdown ended up worsening the already existing inequities within our society. On one hand, with a bulk of work in society being highly gendered, working women found themselves performing higher quantum of housework. The poorer the household, more the chances of other female members of the household being sucked into the drudgeries of housework. On the other hand, apart from unpaid housework, a large component of working women faced *added disadvantages* as their earnings dried up altogether and they were faced with unemployment. This latter point is crucial to note, as wider research by our project team showed that on an average, high quantum of housework have existed in rural and semi-rural contexts prior to the lockdown. Correspondingly, in such non-urban contexts wherein women and girls in the household already perform a lot of manual household work, the negative fallout of the pandemic-cum-lockdown was more keenly felt in terms of reduced wages for agricultural work, etc.⁷ The differential impact of the lockdown clearly stands out in all the interviews conducted, owing to the fact that our interviewees were women workers that hailed from *different* socio-economic backgrounds, regions, occupations, etc.

⁷ As shared in the interview of Ms. Jyoti, Jind District, Haryana, 1st April 2021.

Our interactions with subject experts/feminist researchers also verified what most of our interviewees essentially discussed. The lockdown put an amount of stress on both the work life and household dynamics of majority of women. Post-lockdown measures taken by the state have proved inadequate, for these have been predominantly concerned with the interests of big capital rather than with widespread gender equality, social justice and protection of entitlements.



The Price of Fashion: An Overview of Women Workers in the Garment Industry

Archita Agarwal, III year, Economics Honours

An overview

The textile industry and garment/apparel industry are large employers in India.⁸ Between 1993-94 and 2011-12, employment in India's garment factories and textile factories increased by 7.1 lakh and 1.7 lakhs, respectively. At the same time, there has been a remarkable expansion in total employment, including employment in the unregistered, i.e., unorganised sector,⁹ in both the textile and garment industries, i.e., by 29.4 lakh and 26.8 lakh, respectively, between 1993-94 and 2011-12 (Thomas & Johny 2018). Domestically, textile and garments industries contribute to 4 per cent of India's GDP and taken together they constitute the second largest employer after agriculture (Make in India statistics 2015). However, while the number of jobs available in the sector has increased in the past few decades, concerns have arisen as to the informal and highly flexible nature of employment generated, and its implications for workers in the sector.

The Indian textile industry comprises of three interrelated but competing sectors: the organized mill sector and the handloom and power loom sectors. The ready-made garment industry, which is one of the largest urban employers, is labour-intensive and draws on skilled, unskilled, and semi-skilled manpower (The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India, 2018). The textile industry in India has around 4.5 crore workers, including 35.22 lakh handloom workers, and another six crore workers in allied industries (Ministry of Textiles, 2020). The textile and garment industries have a significant share of women workers and are known to tap the rural population for labour supply.

Both the textile industry and garment industry are geographically centred in parts of northern, southern and western India. The largest ready-made garment manufacturing centres are in Bangalore (Karnataka), Tirupur and Chennai (Tamil Nadu) and the National Capital

⁸ The textile industry refers to units that manufacture textiles, i.e., flexible material created from an interlocking network of yarns or threads. This interlocking of yarns is done through either of the following: weaving, knitting, crocheting, knotting, tating, felting, bonding or braiding the yarns together. The garment/apparel industry refers to units involved in the manufacture and trade of ready-to-wear clothing.

⁹ 'Unorganized sector', as defined by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS), refers to "all unincorporated private enterprises owned by individuals or households engaged in the sale and production of goods and services operated on a proprietary or partnership basis and with less than ten total workers."

Region (NCR). Other garment production clusters include Ludhiana and Kanpur in northern India, Kolkata in eastern India, Mumbai and Gujarat in western India, and Coimbatore in southern India. Earlier the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) basically governed the world trade in textiles and garments from 1974 through 1994. It imposed quotas on the amount developing countries could export to developed countries. MFA was non-operational by the late 1990s. The early phase of garment production in India was merchant-driven, export-led, and began in centres like Delhi (north India) as well as Mumbai (western India). A significant degree of informal structures characterized garment production. For instance, home-based work was prominent for work involving finishing, thread cutting, beads work, embroidery, etc. In Delhi-NCR, tailors were brought from cities like Calcutta, Saharanpur, etc. and they were predominantly men (Mazumdar 2021). South Indian states like Tamil Nadu followed a different pattern of garment production and were more into the knit wear production for domestic market. In fact, the garment industry in the southern states has and continues to employ a high proportion of women workers compared to other garment production hubs in the country.

The ratio of directly employed women workers to total number of employees was 39.1 per cent in the industry, with Tamil Nadu and Karnataka employing a relatively higher proportion than the nation-wide average (Thomas & Johny 2018). Tirupur, for example, is characterised by a young female low-caste workforce, with an average age range from 16 to 25, with some as young as 14 years old (Fair Wear Foundation 2019). Workers are mostly from the rural areas of Tamil Nadu, although the inter-state migrant workforce is on the rise. Workers are largely primarily employed as contract labour for 12 daily working hours, with four hours of compulsory overtime. Female migrant workers face rampant harassment and evidence of forced labour are reported both at the workplace and in the hostels that accommodate workers.

Bangalore (Karnataka) too has a garment workforce, which is mainly made up of female workers. Factories in Bangalore mostly pay overtime, the minimum wage, and non-wage benefits. However, minimum wage does not match any living wage estimates. Neither is overtime always paid at the double rate stipulated in Indian law, and employer's contributions towards the Provident Fund (PF) are often not deposited into the worker's account. Due to the local workforces' relatively higher levels of awareness of their labour rights, factories increasingly employ interstate migrant workers, who are often employed under forced labour working and living conditions, and who are increasingly adolescents. Conversely, garment factories in Delhi-NCR mainly employ male contract workers, who receive virtually no non-

wage benefits and in most cases no minimum wage. At least half of the workforce of Delhi-NCR's garment factories are migrant workers from rural areas as well as poorer North-Western States (Fair Wear Foundation 2019).

Over the past two decades, garment production has transitioned from a largely informal to a largely formal, factory-based industry, highly dependent on labour inputs. In the process, quite a few earlier outsourced processes have been brought inhouse, thereby *decreasing* the share of work for home-based workers, who are mostly women. This is especially true for production for the export market. Nevertheless, the informal component in garment production has not disappeared altogether. Although India is an important exporter of textiles and ready-made garments in the world,¹⁰ currently not all garment factories are export-driven. Notably, a large quantum of garment production in India is for the *domestic* market, and the informal, unorganized sector majorly serves the domestic market (Mazumdar 2021). In fact, even within the formal factory-based garment sector, informalized work contracts are growing.

The labour force in the garment industry is increasingly 'unorganised' and trapped in informality, given the nature of the majority work relations informing the industry. As aptly noted in an ILO review of the sector (Fundamentals 2017):

The phasing out of MFA in 2005 and increased trade liberalisation have allowed lead firms/retailers indiscriminate access to cheap labour from developing countries without bothering about quota limits (LIPS Sedane, CLEC, & SLD, 2015). This has triggered a "race to the bottom" of sorts as both countries and factories within countries compete to remain cost efficient, resulting in downward pressure on workers' wages and a general worsening of working conditions in the industry (Bhattacharjee, Roy, Bhardwaj, & Ghosh, 2015). Advancements in technology, lean retailing and "fast fashion" have further shortened lead time and increased volatility in the sector. At the same time, unit prices of clothing paid by buyers in developed countries like the US have been falling in recent years (Anner, Blair, & Blasi, 2013). These changes vis-à-vis the growing power of retailers has meant that the onus of supplying quality cheap garments on time falls on the suppliers in developing countries. The suppliers, in turn, pass on this burden onto the workers who have the least negotiating power in the entire supply chain.

This intensified exploitation of garment workers has been facilitated to a significant extent by the periodic dilution of landmark labour laws like the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, by

¹⁰ After China, India is the world's second largest exporter of textiles and clothing (India Brand Equity Foundation 2020). However, the growth in India's share in global exports from 2.3 per cent in 1990 to 4 per cent in 2016 has been less significant than China's 8.9 per cent to 36.4 per cent, and Bangladesh's 0.6 per cent to 6.4 per cent (Thomas & Johny 2018).

successive state governments.¹¹ The amendments to the Industrial Disputes Act, in particular, allow for easy layoff of workers. In many instances, without amending the statutory labour laws, informality has been bred within work relations across the manufacturing sector by resorting not just to the legislative route, but by issuing executive orders to the effect of diluting certain landmark labour laws (John 2017). Overall, such developments go hand-in-hand with the shift of certain components of production to slums, to small and microenterprises where a bulk of labour laws are not legally enforceable.

There are indeed a large number of micro, small, and medium-sized factories and firms which employ *non-permanent* workers¹² so as to stay below the stipulated threshold on the size of the workforce on which protective labour legislations will be implemented. This is done mainly to avoid higher wage costs and factory inspection. The average size of a factory is relatively small in India. In 2014-15, the average numbers of workers per factory were 112 and 151, respectively, in the textile industry and garment industry in India. In comparison, the median factory size in Bangladesh's garment industry ranges from 650 to 1200 workers (Thomas & Johny 2018).

Importantly, most women workers in the industry are unorganised, i.e., not mobilized in trade unions. Further, the share of home-based women workers in the total unorganized workforce is higher in textiles and garments than in the overall manufacturing sector (Hirway 2011). In other words, low-paid home-based work by women is largely work which has been sub-let by the textile and garment industries. Home workers usually face the most extensive brunt of informality. Most of such workers are paid on piece rate basis, and they have no access to any form of social security provisions, unionisation or collective bargaining.

Recognition of such workers and their proper classification was provided in the *Shramshakti Report* of 1988. This report of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector,¹³ headed by Ela Bhatt, founder of SEWA, classified home-based workers into two categories. The first being those working at piece rates for somebody else (an employer/trader/contractor), and the second as own account small entrepreneurs or independent artisans. This formulation extended beyond the narrow definition

¹¹ 'Labour' is a subject on the concurrent list, which thereby allows both the state governments and central governments to legislate on labour matters. This explains the regular amendments to statutory labour laws within many states – a reality which seriously contradicts the claims of industry that India's labour laws are rigid and inflexible.

¹² Non-permanent workers can be more flexibly hired and fired.

¹³ The Commission was appointed by the Government of India.

of workers in household industries of artisanal vintage by including both self-employed own account workers, as well as piece rated workers in some form of a wage relationship with an employer/trader/contractor (Bhatt et al. 1988; Mazumdar 2018).

There have been several studies on the connection between global brands and their operation in relation to women workers in factories/sweatshops, etc. However, studies on home-based work are limited, which leads to the generalisation that global supply chains propel home-based work – a point that is not true, given India’s large domestic market and demand. Textile manufactures in the home-based sector includes handloom, coir spinning, embroidery/chikan/zari, crochet/lace, and in some areas homebased power looms. Labour in handloom units formed a significant portion of workforce at the time of independence. However, the number of handlooms in the country fell from around 48 lakhs in 1985 to less than 24 lakhs by 2009-10. Despite the declining profits and overall fall in handloom employment, the numbers of women workers in handloom work have, ironically, continued to increase. Across the 15-year period from 1995-2010, women workers in handloom production increased by around nine lakhs, while men in handloom production reduced by close to 36 lakhs (Mazumdar 2018). In fact, women home-based workers in textile manufacturing are still largely concentrated in the handloom sector.

The employment of women in textile and garment production is clearly characterized by crushing inequality and massive exploitation, best manifested in low and stagnant wages, regular extraction of overtime, patriarchal managerial systems, prevalence of bondage-like work arrangements and child labour, etc.

Challenges faced by garment workers

A field study by Arpan Ganguly (September 2013) estimated the wages of workers in garment factories in Gurgaon, Bengaluru and Tirupur. The basic monthly rate varied from INR 5200-7000, INR 5200-5915, INR 5750-9250 and the monthly overtime rate from INR 1320-1800, INR 880-1000, INR 480-790, respectively (see Appendix-3). Worryingly, overtime work without payment of overtime wages has become an institutionalized phenomenon in the garment industry (Fundamentals & ILO 2017). Workers regularly engage in work far exceeding the specified work day of eight hours (Ganguly 2013).

Several textile and garment production units are strategically located in the country’s many Special Economic Zones (SEZs) where a disturbing picture of industrial relations often

surfaces. There are specific SEZs for textile and garment industries like the Mundra SEZ Textile and Apparel Park Limited in Kutch (Gujarat) (Apparel Resources News-Desk 2020). These zones are export oriented and are supposedly built to increase India's global production competitiveness by major cost-cutting measures, which of course, affects the labour force. Correspondingly, the work conditions in SEZs are known to be deplorable. Most labour is contractual and a large component of workers is even tied down to informal work relations. Trade union activity is very limited and unions find entry into these zones extremely difficult, given the nature of SEZ administration. It has been observed that labour laws that are supposed to be operational in SEZ are largely absent in practice. Many workers in these zones are terminated without pay, paid below minimum wages, and are subjected to prolonged work hours. It is recognised that only workers in permanent or "fixed-term" contracts get minimum wages and access to social security benefits like the Provident Fund, ESI membership, and bonus (Parwez 2016).

A study by Swaminathan (2005) revealed a critical situation of women workers in SEZs. They suffered from frequent headaches due to tension and intense concentration at workplace, acute back pain, joint pain, swelling in the legs, severe abdominal pain, various types of allergies, skin ailments and piles (the result of sitting in the same position for hours). Most women working in the garment units suffered from asthma, persistent cough, and breathlessness due to lack of proper ventilation in the factory units (Swaminathan, 2005).

Rao (2020) highlights the issues with unionisation in Srirangapatna where the Global Giant H&M factory is located. Unionisation is reportedly difficult, especially for women workers because most of them are first generation workers who have come straight from agriculture into factory work. They do not have any experience with the process of unionizing. Secondly, the entire garment industry workspace is so pressured that they cannot talk to each other. They work continuously from 8:30 am to 5:30 pm under heavy production targets. The women are, notably, supervised by male supervisors or male managers, who keeps a very tight surveillance on the women workers. The workers have long distance commutes and have little time for anything else after work hours as they must rush home for household chores and care work. There is just no chance for them to stay back to meet and unionize (Rao 2020). Further, it has been argued that the Industrial Relations Code 2020 will make unionization harder by mandating a 14-day prior notice for a strike or lock-out (PRS Legislative Research 2020).

During the pandemic there has been an attempt to change the definition of ‘workday’ and introduce longer work hours on a regular basis for individual workers, as well as night work for women. Three new Labour Codes were notified by the central government when the country’s labouring masses were still reeling under the adverse impact of the ill-fated lockdown, and mass agitations were difficult to organize in response to the government’s decision, considering the prohibition on public gatherings. The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Condition Code, 2020, is one of the new Codes which redefines the ‘workday’ for women in the manufacturing sector by allowing for their employment in the night shift, i.e., between 7:00 pm to 6:00 am, subject to conditions relating to safety, provision of vacation period, and their ‘consent’.

This aforementioned provision has been in discussion for some time now in official circles, especially with employer lobbies pushing hard for relaxation of the prohibition on night work by women in the manufacturing sector. Considering the exploitative and oppressive work regime on the factory shop floor, the overall lack of regulation via safety audits of workplaces, and the lack of committees to investigate sexual harassment in most workplaces, the legalizing of night shifts for women in the manufacturing sector can hardly be seen to benefit the female workforce (John 2017). Consent in such scenarios can be easily manufactured. Indeed, exploitation of women by male supervisors is very prevalent in the textile and garment factories, and in such light, night work can prove disastrous. What many have identified as the ‘patriarchal mode of production’ is constantly reproduced in these factories where men hold the power to squeeze labour from the women workers (Rao 2020).

Discrimination in the sector is structural as is evident from the all-male management structure, recruitment practices which employ young female migrant workers from far off rural places and hostel facilities that rob women workers of their privacy and freedom of movement. Numerous studies by civil society groups such as the Freedom Fund, Anti-Slavery International and the Centre for Research on Multinational Companies say the women workers are kept in closed hostels, overworked, underpaid, and abused (Bhalla 2015; Warriar M. V. 2018).

Another serious index of exploitation and oppression faced by women garment workers is bondage-like work contracts, and the extraction of child labour. This is evident mainly in the various forms of bonded labour, forced labour, child labour and human trafficking existing on the ground (Association for Stimulating Know How 2014). Despite the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, modern slavery persists in various parts of the supply chain in the

industry, as noted from places like Tamil Nadu. For instance, women workers recruited under the Sumangali Scheme in Tamil Nadu is worth noting.

Under the scheme, girls mostly between the ages of 14-21 came to be recruited on time-bound contracts, for INR 30,000-50,000. The money is to be used for their dowry and hence the name 'Sumangali', signifying a soon-to-be-married young girl. Though mostly prevalent in the spinning mills located in districts such as Erode, Coimbatore and Dindigul, it has been found to exist in several garment factories of Tirupur as well. Girls recruited under the scheme usually come from poor families and may often belong to marginalised communities (Fundamentals & ILO 2017).

The India Garment Workers Report, 2014, by International Federation for Human Rights highlighted the Sumangali Scheme, which subsequently led to the Madras High Court abolishing it altogether. The district committee recommended that employment of women below the age of 18 was to be prohibited and a minimum wage of INR 150 was made mandatory. A cap of 20 per cent was put on workers that could be hired as apprentices and it was ensured that the workers had freedom of movement. An article by Sindhuja Parthasarathy reported that the practice, however, is still prevalent in districts of Dindigul, under different names like Kanmani, Ponmagal, Tirumagal, Mangalyam etc. (Parthasarathy 2017).

Similar to the Sumangali Scheme was the recruitment structure used by Shahi Exports Private Limited in Faridabad and Noida, which brought in young unmarried women workers by making them sign a bond that they will not get pregnant for three years. This was stopped when the arrangement came to be known in the public domain. However, the Shahi Exports model was made a national one through government-sponsored schemes like Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana or Skill India wherein large numbers of women workers in their late teens and early twenties from northern and eastern states like Jharkhand, Odisha, Assam, and Madhya Pradesh are being brought to the garment factories of Karnataka or Noida (Mazumdar 2021).

These young women are trained in skill development and placed in factories and given accommodation in hostels. Women at these workplaces are doubly disadvantaged due to language and mobility barriers, and are plagued with low or delayed salaries, as well as physical and mental harassment (Amrutha 2019). Many of these women are only paid stipends not full wages as they are brought in as apprentices. This is despite delivering the full product to employer. Overall, skill development of this kind is completely funded by the government but

represents a fully privatized system of delivery that benefits private employers, who save on skilling and even wage costs.

Field work and data collection

Apart from examining existing literature on the garment sector and its female workforce, our research comprised of contacting subject experts, trade unionists and actual women workers. The field work was conducted remotely via google meet/ telephone. We used the semi-structured interview method.

A detailed interaction was conducted with Dr. Indrani Mazumdar, a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi. She has authored various books, articles and research papers on the nature of work by women in India, including specialized studies like "Gender, Labour and Women's Work: Issues, Experiences and Debates in India", "A Gendered Employment Crisis and Women's Labour in 21st Century India", "Women's Work, Employment and the Indian Economy", and "Homebased Work in 21st Century India". She has worked closely with both the male and female labour force in the garment industry over several years.

Another important component of our data collection was interactions with trade unionists like Mr. Narendar Pandey, who is associated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). He is a migrant worker from Bihar, who has now settled in the city and owns his own housing. He currently works in an export unit factory in Gautam Budh Nagar, Noida. He was interviewed so as to capture the experiences of male migrant workers in the garment sector of Delhi-NCR, as well as to better understand the challenges to unionization in garment production hubs. Interactions with him also proved a crucial window into gauging the impact of the lockdown on the lives of garment sector workers.

Lastly, Ms. Lalsi Devi, who is also employed in a garment export unit in Gautam Budh Nagar and has been working in the industry for the past five years, was interviewed to garner more information about the situation of women workers in the garment industry. We posed more detailed questions to her as to the challenges faced during the lockdown period of 2020. Attempts were also made for field-visits to home-based workers in New Ashok Nagar area, near Noida, through the network of SEWA. However, with the surge in COVID-19 cases in Delhi-NCR, this could not be pursued.

Fieldwork analysis

(a) Patterns and general conditions:

From our survey of existing literature on the garment industry and our interactions with Dr. Indrani Mazumdar and Narendar Pandey, it was clear that in Delhi-NCR the proportion of women garment workers is much less than when compared to south India. Women's employment touches about 30 per cent in the Delhi-NCR garment production hub while in the southern states it goes up to 70 per cent to 80 per cent. Hiring practices of Shahi Exports in Faridabad and Noida, which brought in young unmarried women workers, and the state's skill development program wherein young girls are supplied from states like Jharkhand, Odisha, etc. to factories in Noida, are also known features of the country's garment industry. However, despite such trends, in Noida the employment for women in the garment sector has remained low. The proportion of aged women is also extremely low. There are some married women, but a higher proportion of them are young women.

Our interaction with the subject expert, the trade unionist and female garment worker also amply revealed that the nature of the garment industry is such that it is plagued by a low wage rate, worker-burnout, draconic supervision, and intensified work extraction during periods of high demand. Overtime double rate is often not offered, but due to low wages the workers end up accepting overtime to supplement their basic wages. This is also consistent with Lalsi Devi's experience of working in the garment industry in Noida for the past five years as she reported that the work is stressful with extreme pressure being asserted by managerial staff to reach production deadlines. Since low wages were offered, overtime was welcomed by her. In fact, for Lalsi Devi, it was a 'good' thing to be able to avail of overtime.

For women workers, the conditions of work in garment units have been worse in comparison to male workers, and there has been a perpetual problem of lack of equal remuneration. Men are more prone to unionization and assertion; a point highlighted by the trade union leader. Women in contrast are lacking bargaining power, more so post lockdown, and so they settle for lower wage rates than what is mandated by the government. However, taking the all-India macro perspective of unionization into account, it was rightly pointed out by the subject expert that in trade unions a higher proportion of women are seen nowadays. In fact, the proportion of women workers that are part of unions is higher than their actual proportion in the workforce. In the unions of garment workers almost one-third members are women, whereas women are around 22 per cent of the garment workforce. Further

corroboration of this fact can also be seen in the recently fought struggles by women garment workers in unions, such the flash protests of April 2018 in Bangalore over a 10 February 2016 notification that would have allowed employees to access only half their Employees Provident Fund corpus until they reached the age of 58 – a policy change that would have affected the finances of over seven crore workers in the country but which elicited the most resounding outrage from this section of women workers. Moreover, as noted by the subject expert, unionised women workers are largely part of the *mixed* gender trade unions instead of gender-based collectives/self-help groups like SEWA, etc. Nonetheless, a sizeable number of women garment workers still remain non-unionized. Lalsi Devi, for example, was not part of any these trade unions, and she shared that it was because she found it difficult to manage household chores and factory work together.

Our contacts also shared that there has been an influx of women in handloom industry as certain garment factories closed down or relocated. However, the handloom industry has become increasingly obsolete in the country. Now, for example, the last remaining production of handloom in Delhi-NCR is of sweeping cloth, which is used for swabbing. As pointed out by experts, while the handloom sector is crumbling, it has seen increased employment of women, which some estimates place as high as 70 to 80 per cent. As a struggling industry the handloom manufacturing sector clearly seeks to stay afloat by mobilizing the most vulnerable sections of the workforce, i.e., women.

In some garment production clusters the wages are even lower than say paid domestic work. Of course, women often refrain from paid domestic work due to the stigma or low social status assigned to such work when compared to factory employment. Hence, even when alternate employment was available for women during lockdown, for many workers like Lalsi Devi it remained last option only to be availed during extreme destitute.

(b) Impact of lockdown:

During the actual months of lockdown in 2020, due to devastating circumstances stemming from overnight unemployment and mismanagement of the Public Distribution System (PDS), many migrant workers had to return to their villages. However, many have been unable to secure a stable livelihood and sustenance back in the village. As a consequence, there has been a trickling back of such migrant workers in the desperate search for some kind of regular employment. However, re-hiring in the overall urban economy has been sluggish. The issue of

lack of work in the garment sector, in particular, stems from reduction in the workload since the COVID-19 pandemic has been a global phenomenon, impacting businesses worldwide.

Post lockdown, in Noida, the work in the garment factories reduced by almost 50 per cent. Workdays for workers like Lalsi Devi has reduced. There is no overtime work offered, and the workday consists of an 8-hour shift. Workers are being increasingly dismissed without pay due to the management's claim of no work being available. According to Narendar Pandey's assessment, with limited orders coming, up to 70 per cent of garment workers have been removed from jobs since 25 March 2020. In May 2020 when factories reopened, only a small percentage of workers were reemployed. This was due to the government's Standard Operating Protocols (SoP) of only 10 per cent of the workers being allowed within the factory premises. As with 500-700 workers in a factory it was difficult to maintain social distancing in 500 guz (approximately 4500 sq. foot) small premises, and so many were simply *not* hired back.

After end June and beginning of July 2020, the number of workers increased, and factory workers began to be reemployed at around 50 per cent of the initial strength. However, many workers found it difficult to return to work. Mr. Narendar and Lalsi Devi, for instance, both shared that they found it difficult to find employment after their units were shutdown. The post lockdown period has not been easy as explained by Lalsi Devi, who claims to have had to change four companies to find suitable employment.

Those who were employed as staff in the garment units with higher and fixed salaries have seen a reduction of about 20 to 30 per cent, and in some industries even 50 per cent in their salaries. Wages have dropped even for contractual work. Earlier if one could earn INR 9,000 per month, now can only earn around INR 6,000 or 7,000.

In the Noida belt, women workers in garment units have not been a larger number. Usually in the pre-lockdown period their numbers were somewhere between 10 per cent to 12 per cent of the workforce. So, for example in a unit of 500 garment workers, just about 50 were women workers. Now post the lockdown of 2020, women workers have reduced even further, since overall employment has reduced the factory. Barring the women employed in higher management levels like accounting and human resources (HR), the women factory workers were predominantly concentrated in the tailoring and thread cutting units. Now however, the male contractors for tailoring, cutting etc. are preferring men over women for these jobs too. Hence, women workers' numbers have reduced even further in this garment production hub.

Home-based work in the garment industry was taking a beating even before the pandemic-cum-lockdown, as reflected in the drop in women's waged work as per the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) of 2018-19. Expectedly, it was worst affected during the pandemic due to unavailability of work and employment in a sector which was already dying.

The Labour Codes that have passed by the government during the pandemic, take away from rights of workers in significant ways. For example, several health provisions were removed and creches taken away, which even though were hardly operational earlier, were a recognized right won by earlier struggles of India's working masses. The provision of workplaces free of sexual harassment has not been made a categorical part of the new Labour Codes, and segments of workers like domestic workers – most of whom are women – are strategically not mentioned in the Codes. The push towards night work for women would adversely affect all factory workers, but more so for women in the garment industry. Both Narendar Pandey and Lalsi Devi opposed to night work for women citing problem of security and safety and the fact that for many women with children are busy with household chores and child rearing post factory work which makes it difficult for women to work at night. Also, access to equal remuneration in the garment industry is still a big challenge.

Difficulties from lockdown rose because of lack of money, not just daily wage earners but even those earning INR 20,000 a month like supervisor, line in-charge, etc with family suffered without money. The government assured money that factory owners were supposed to pay their workers was received by none. Many employers blamed late payment on closure of banks, delayed payment from foreign firms etc. Women like Lalsi Devi had no option to pay for their children's online classes, tuition fees, provide ration for the family and had absolutely no savings. PDS was extremely inadequate to feed family of five members and the 25 kilos received from PDS were insufficient the last the entire month, which lasted barely for 10 days. Further even if food was available by community workers many refrained from stepping outside their lane, to not come in dispute with the local police.

This led to a major food security problem for many people especially those migrant workers from Bihar, Bengal, Andhra Pradesh during lockdown. Many also faced difficulty in paying for their rented accommodation. Those with own housing and good house owners did not face this problem, however there were only a fortunate few like this.

Many workers stuck in the city, had to sustain themselves through community work, which did not always provide adequate amount of food. For most workers, including Narendar

Pandey and Lalsi Devi, no help extended in terms of wages or in kind from employers, government, trade union or NGOs. It was also found that the political party in power provided ration to its own workers from the district administration. Many such distributions among the public were just for the sake of clicking pictures and making false claim that the ration had been distributed among 200 people when meagre 10 people might have only received it.

Many like Lalsi Devi had no expectations from the government, while Narendar Pandey made crucial suggestions like universalizing the PDS system, providing Jan Dhan transfers to *all* the needy, and extending social security cover to all workers just like the employers have enjoyed several benefits – ironically, with or without crises – such as tax holidays, subsidies on factory land, credit facilities, etc. Hence, as rightly emphasized by Comrade Pandey, even though there was disruption of the global supply chain and a lack of demand, which reduced the industrial output and profits of factory owners and industrialists, their losses have been safeguarded by the state. This was unlike what happened in the case of workers, who have been left in the lurch during a worldwide pandemic.

Conclusion

The garment industry in developing countries like India remains largely a high-volume, low-cost production base that is characterized by disproportionate overtime and low wages. This intrinsic nature of the industry positions garment workers in a very precarious condition, especially women garment workers. Moreover, women workers shoulder the majority of care responsibilities in the household, including child care, elderly care, providing sick care, etc.; all of which are responsibilities that have *increased* due to the crisis ushered in by the pandemic. The garment industry, as most industries, has a visible gender pay gap, and women are firmly positioned at the lower end of the wage structure. With the large-scale lay-offs due to COVID-19, many garment workers, a significant component being women, are without an income.

Historically speaking, given the labour surplus, and the relative ease with which employers have relocated production in India, garment workers have often been forced to settle for short-term contracts. Women garment workers are more likely to work under temporary contracts. There are still others, who work without any kind of contract, particularly when factories rely heavily on subcontracting and homeworkers. Low-pay, highly insecure work contracts, and less powerful positions on the factory shop-floor ensure that negotiating contracts is difficult for women workers.

With COVID-19, it has been the temporary workers who have been the first to lose their livelihoods. With no contractual agreements to cover severance or paid leave, they have been left without anything. Importantly, workers who lose their jobs suddenly and without pay, slide into the risk for extreme forms of exploitation, including human trafficking, scam recruitment offers, and sexual exploitation. We can imagine how women garment workers, desperate for work, have been pushed further into such precarity in the past year.

Measures that do not address prevailing gender inequalities and heightened gender discrimination during COVID-19, will disproportionately worsen the condition of female garment workers. Unfortunately, given the low trade union density within the industry as well as throughout the country, and the fact that women workers are underrepresented in social dialogue, policy deliberations and mainstream unions; the responses to the COVID-19 crisis do not adequately include women's voices, even though they are highest affected in the garment industry.

A gender-sensitive response to the current crisis, at least in the short-term entails measures like: (i) the inclusion of women and other vulnerably-placed workers in negotiations on wages, benefits, and health and safety committees; (ii) immediate enhancement of social security benefits by the Indian state; (iii) recognition of the urgent need for financial support for the lowest-paid members of the garment workforce; (iv) regular payments for workers so as to prevent them from being forced to take desperate measures to ensure survival; (v) promotion of safe and healthy workplaces in factories that have re-opened, with regular audits by the Labour inspectorate; and (vi) acknowledgement of the enhanced risk of violence and harassment against women and other vulnerable groups, as well as increased risk of day-to-day exploitation. With respect to the last point, it is, thus, important for garment brands and the Indian state to ensure that there is not a rush of orders post-COVID-19 shutdown, which will simply breed excessive overtime. There should also be efforts to provide safe transport for especially for women garment workers. Of course, for such measures to materialize in concrete ways, garment workers need greater unionization, especially the consistent mobilization of the more vulnerable segments of the workforce, like women workers.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown: Domestic Workers and their Plight

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Introduction

There are 10.6 million domestic workers in India; most of whom are women of which 82 per cent are employed in urban households. While domestic workers are a large component of the unregulated informal sector, on an average their wages are much lower and stagnant than in the case of many other urban informal works. Domestic workers have very limited social protections, and are commonly exposed to poor working conditions in terms of high and unregulated quantum of work, arduous and repetitive work, limited leave and rest time, low remuneration, etc. They are frequently also victims of verbal and physical abuse.

Historically speaking, domestic servants, or essentially, practices of servitude in elite households have existed within feudal and colonial social structures in India (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 12; Chatterjee, 1999). However, the form of extraction of such labour has evolved over time, and more so in the postcolonial context considering the backdrop of restrictions gradually placed on the feudal authority of erstwhile social elites and the consolidation of new class formations in urban India. In this light, the 1990s are termed as an important decade for this industry due to the rapid expansion of the *market form*, i.e., paid nature of domestic work from this period onwards.

The main reason for this aforementioned change has been attributed to the growing participation of middle-class women in paid, professional work, owing to the steady expansion of the service sector and opening up of other employment and educational opportunities. Juggling regular, paid employment and the pre-existing norms that assert household work as largely women's responsibility, middle-class women came to negotiate both paid and unpaid work by sub-letting their housework onto a domestic worker (John 2020). This has resulted in an increased demand for domestic workers, especially in the urban areas. Further, the visible rise of a *new* middle class with a distinct lifestyle in metropolitan cities has also seen the emergence of a generation of millennials (Waldrop 2012), who consciously distance themselves from what is seen as stigmatized housework when compared to older generations of middle-class households. Thus, employment, educational aspirations, as well as new norms

of leisure have triggered a rapid growth in the demand for paid domestic services (John 2020). The other reason for a surge in the domestic work industry is the agrarian crisis and the subsequent distress driven migration of rural women to urban areas. Cheap and abundantly available labour for domestic work has in fact become a convenient option in India when compared to other countries (John 2020). Many domestic workers live-in and are almost permanently on call in the concerned household. Others live elsewhere and may work for several employers, perhaps only working for a few hours per week for each. However, in India there are two types of live-out workers: live-out full time and live-out part time (KPMG Advisory Services 2015). The former working full time for a single household daily, and the latter working in different households for a specified number of hours or doing a specific task.

According to data, Indian homes have witnessed a 120 per cent increase in domestic workers in the decade post liberalization. The figure was 7,40,000 in 1991, it has increased to 16.6 lakh in 2001 (Nanda, 2020). Today, it has become a norm for a family to depend on a 'maid'. This continuously growing workforce is predominantly made up of women from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Studies point to the fact that a large component of domestic workers in India are from lower-caste groups, adivasi (broadly translated as tribal) communities, and essentially, from the ranks of the agrarian poor. Their work constitutes typically of cleaning, washing, cooking, baby-sitting, taking care of elderly, etc.

It is full-time domestic workers who are saddled with a plethora of manual household chores. However, in India, not all domestic workers attend to each of such forms of work. For example, it is not uncommon to find part-time workers who take on cooking and kitchen related work alone, while others take up largely cleaning and washing work. The wealthier the household, there are more chances of full-time and part-time domestic workers being simultaneously employed. Most part-time workers however is only 'part-time' from the point of view of individual employers and often undertake the same or multiple tasks in different households. Their aggregate daily hours of work across all employer households therefore may be equal to or greater than that of full-time workers in a factory or construction site (Neetha N. 2021).

Composition of domestic workers and the nature of work

While a section of domestic workers come from the ranks of the local labouring poor, a vast section is migrant labour. A typical trend we find in Indian metropolises is that impoverished

families migrate to the city from the far away rural hinterland for daily waged work in the construction industry, with the women members often picking up paid domestic work in residential complexes near construction hubs. Current patterns reveal large-scale migration of labouring poor from the greater Sunderbans area and Brahmaputra River basin into newer and expanding metropolises. Thus, states like West Bengal and Assam are hot-beds of this migration, which is largely the consequence of rural impoverishment and climate-related displacement stemming from ecological destruction of mangrove forests and of the larger Brahmaputra River basin (John 2021). The number of domestic workers from other states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and from tribal belts in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Orissa have also been growing due to truncated land reforms and other factors that have together fuelled widespread agrarian distress. Another pattern is relatively short-distance migration from neighbouring rural districts into bustling metropolises, such as in the case of Pune and Mumbai where a large component of domestic workers is from neighbouring districts like Ratnagiri, Thane, Sholapur, etc. These are typically drought prone districts in Maharashtra (John 2021).

Analysing the caste composition of the industry reveals a changing and a dynamic trend. Initially the workforce composition was Muslim migrants and the marginalized communities. As the sector expanded the workforce composition was also redefined. Now when the macro data is analysed, the proportion of women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the total domestic work industry has declined, and the share of upper caste women in the sector increased, but not so evidently (Neetha N 2019). Noticeably, there is a high degree of segregation in this industry. Women from upper caste groups with a defined social status are usually employed as cooks and ‘nannies’, while women from lower caste groups are usually concentrated in cleaning work (Neetha N. 2021). There is also a difference in their salaries. In this way, caste status and even regional affiliation contribute to differential experiences in terms of entry into this labour market and in terms of the intensity of discrimination and exploitation in the workplace. Several Bodo women domestic workers from the state of Assam, for example, are preferred by foreign employers in places like Gurgaon in Delhi-NCR. These women themselves prefer working for foreigners as they pay better than Indian families. Meanwhile, women from Assam’s neighbouring state, i.e., West Bengal, predominantly find work in Indian households in Gurgaon (Priya 2020).

Domestic workers are characterized by high rate of illiteracy. The general disempowerment faced manifests itself in the fact that most domestic workers are unable to easily access legal remedies against workplace violence, molestation and other abusive

behaviour meted out by employers. These workers are continuously subjugated by their employers and society at large does not give due respect to their skill and hard work. They work in extremely exploitative work conditions, characterized by low, stagnant wages. There are two main reasons for such undervaluation of domestic work. First, is the non-recognition of the household (unpaid) work done by women at large, and second, is the fact that a bulk of this stigmatized housework is performed by women from otherwise socially and economically marginalized sections of society. Additionally, domestic work is governed by *personalised* nature of the workplace, i.e., the 'home' of the employer. Personal relations which govern entry into work and the conditions of work, as well as the contours of the workplace being the four walls of an employer's house, make this sector qualitatively different. Owing to this as well as this sector not being a traditional production unit, state agencies have tended to steer clear of regulation of this work (Neetha N. 2019: 5). It therefore becomes clear that there is more to the exploitative employer-employee relationship than the low wage rates, irregular payment, etc.

Typically, the work relation in domestic service is characterized by a high degree of privatization of regulation or tremendous private power of employers, which allows the employer to exercise *quasi-magisterial* power over the very being of the domestic worker (John 2020). As soon as workers enter inside the gated housing society of their employers, the dominance of employers unfolds. In many instances, domestic workers cannot enter without a 'pass' (which is issued by employer after police verification), and are frisked on their entry as well as exit from the complex. The checking at the gate is reportedly so rigorous that domestic workers are regularly inconvenienced. At times calls are made to the residents by the guards when they are slightly suspicious of a domestic worker's movement. If a domestic worker enters the complex with a hundred rupee note, if she exits with a little extra money then a clarification is sought and the employer is contacted if need be (Mochhary et al 2017).

Apart from this, physical assaults, the use of abusive language, and sexual exploitation at the work place are common. As a result, numerous cases of physical assault and rape of domestic workers can be witnessed. State agencies have little reliable information on the actual number of domestic workers in this country and such unaccounted domestic workers keep falling prey to human trafficking, rape, and murder, with little beckoning effect on public authority and society at large. Child labour is increasing at an alarming rate in this field, especially when we consider how girls below the age of 15 are forced to perform domestic work at a minimal wage under despotic working conditions. Additionally, deadly assaults on domestic workers by their employers are usually brushed under the carpet as 'suicides'.

Recently, one such case happened in Gurgaon. Ranjitha Brahma, a 17-year-old Assamese domestic worker was found dead in the building of her employer on 10 March, 2017. The Gurgaon police took three months to get the accused employer to join the investigation. In spite of the employer's evasiveness the police refused to make the arrest, therefore failing to prevent the scope for tampering with the evidence. The compromised nature of investigation is evident in the routine bureaucratic functioning of the special investigation team formed in Ranjitha Brahma's case after much agitation by domestic workers (John 2017).

Unionization of domestic workers

In most parts of the country, domestic workers do not have proper unions that collectively raise their issues. Not recognized as 'workers' under the statutes of important labour laws, it has proven additionally difficult for these workers to organize. Till today they struggle to register their unions with the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions. In some states in India there has been a history of some unionization, such as in some cities in Maharashtra, West Bengal, and in Delhi-NCR. Such unionization and resulting collective pressure of domestic workers has led to some state governments amending specific labour laws to include domestic workers. The Maharashtra and Haryana state governments, for instance, have included domestic work within the schedule of the Minimum Wages Act of their respective states. However, things still remain on paper as unionization of these workers is fleeting.

The need for the unionization of domestic workers has evolved around concerns regarding standardized wages, quantum of work extracted, protocols of entry and exit into housing societies, protocols on leaves, acts of verbal and physical abuse by employers, as well as police atrocities. Given that a significant number of domestic workers live in ghettoized slums, even local slum issues like gender-based violence, police harassment, harassment by slum mafia, water problems, etc. are a rallying point for the organization of migrant domestic workers (John 2021).

The regular influx of newer migrants, as well as other new developments in the labour market such as corporatization of domestic services (i.e., creation of housekeeping companies), has meant that existing organizations of domestic workers find it difficult to standardize wages and other aspects to work conditions (John 2021). State apathy and connivance of local state agencies (like the police) with employers is another obstacle to unionization. In India, high-handed police action vis-à-vis domestic workers is a noted problem, though very often police

atrocities or police negligence with respect to workers' complaints against employers has also facilitated more unionization.

At present there are several efforts to unionize this workforce, the oldest initiative being in Pune (Maharashtra) which saw the formation of the Pune Shahaar Molkarin Sanghatana in 1980. Another long-standing effort at unionization is through the National Domestic Workers' Movement (NDWM) that spread from Mumbai (Maharashtra) to several other states. However, unionization is yet to take off as more resilient techniques at organization (such neighbourhood unionism in place of workplace conventional unionism) are still evolving to meet new conditions in this job market, and unionization has still to gain ground within the larger trade union movement. Likewise, existing federations of trade unions like AITUC, CITU, INTUC, etc. have yet to develop a firm foothold within this over-exploited workforce (Sen and Sengupta 2016: 254), although some efforts are visible, especially under the aegis of the women wings of parliamentary Left parties such as CPI(M) (Sen and Sengupta 2016: 263).

There are many civil society initiatives, NGOs, as well as non-registered unions that are in the forefront of organizing domestic workers in big cities. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Kerala, for example, has sought to unionize domestic workers and professionalize their status such that its membership documents are accepted for registration with the Artisan and Skilled Workers' Welfare Scheme. There are unions unregistered unions like Gharelu Kamgar Union (GKU) in Delhi-NCR, which are actively working to organize domestic workers against their overexploitation by the employers. The union has organized protests demonstrations at several occasions such as at Mini Secretariat in Gurgaon, seeking to get the pressing issues of workers addressed. Below is the list of demands put up by the union regarding a protest it organized at Mini Secretariat, Gurgaon:

Demands of domestic workers¹⁴

1. The police should write down domestic workers' complaints and take immediate action on it.
2. The money of their work should be given in their account within three days at the beginning of the month.
3. All domestic workers are entitled to four days leave in every month.
4. There should be restroom in every building for the domestic workers.
5. Pay workers as per the prices decided by the union.

¹⁴ From a pamphlet of Gharelu Kamgar Union.

The most important demand mentioned above is regarding filing of cases involving domestic workers and consequent action on their complaints by the police. The demand captures the characteristic feature of domestic work industry in present-day NCR region, wherein complaints of domestic workers concerning their everyday issues are ignored by the state. The state only concerns itself with the workers' issues when they take to collective action, signalling a 'law and order' problem for the state, which was demonstrated recently in a case in Noida that falls within the Delhi-NCR.

The said case can be traced back to a confrontation that broke out between wealthy residents in a posh housing society, Mahagun Moderne in Noida sector 78, and a gathering of agitated domestic workers and their families on the morning of 12 July, 2017. The immediate reason for the outbreak was disappearance of a domestic worker, Johra Bibi. The outbreak revealed the rampant exploitation of domestic workers and the huge antagonism between their interest and those of their employers. Under immense pressure from the workers, the police were forced to register a First Information Report (FIR), which it does not normally do in cases involving domestic workers. Later when the matter had somewhat settled down, the police side-lined the first FIR in its investigation, which immediately after the incident had been filed in Johra Bibi's name. After this FIR, three FIRs were lodged by persons claiming to be representatives of the Mahagun residents and a supervisor, respectively. Correspondingly, 13 workers were arbitrarily arrested by the Noida police. The police deliberately made it difficult for their lawyers to get them bail by slapping the charge of attempt to murder on these workers (Mochhary et al 2017).

Lockdown and enhanced precarity

In the context of such prevailing informality of domestic work and deeply entrenched private regulation of this work, the pandemic-cum-lockdown wreaked massive dislocation for majority of domestic workers. The pandemic induced lockdown had a far-reaching effect on domestic workers. With singular prominence being assigned to COVID-19 and the channelizing of already scarce healthcare resources towards one disease, the period of the lock-down proved extremely difficult to the labouring poor to access public healthcare facilities, especially in the case of migrant workers like domestic workers. Those suffering from other contagious diseases (often with higher fatality rates than Covid-19) were denied treatment at many public-funded hospitals due to enmasse downsizing of Out Patient Department (OPD) services (Munshi

2020). Migrant women such as domestic workers, constructions workers, etc. faced tremendous difficulty in accessing prenatal and postnatal care in public hospitals.

The biggest challenge, of course, faced by the domestic workers was cash crunch that was triggered by the overnight unemployment. Domestic workers lost jobs overnight with the imposition of the lockdown in March 2020, which was a time period when the country had barely 400 cases of COVID-19. As part of the migrant labour force, they were subsequently provided little or no succour whilst being trapped in cities. For example, a survey conducted by Domestic Workers Sector Skill Council (DWSSC) in the summer of 2020 concluded that 38 per cent of the domestic workers faced problem in arranging food and other basic amenities for their families (Newslick 2020). Even though the government claimed to provide adequate free ration through the Public Distribution System (PDS), most such workers did not have an access to ration, either because they lacked a ration card in the city, had a ration card with the address of their native village, or lost out in the long queues which surfaced on a daily basis outside ration shops. As explained by trade unionists associated with the Gharelu Kamgar Union (GKU),¹⁵ given that the bulk of domestic workers are migrants, local ration shops were more dismissive of their requests to purchase ration and pay later.

A report by Domestic Workers Rights Union (DWRU) (The Hindu 2020) goes to show that more than 91 per cent of domestic workers were not paid salaries in April and 50 per cent of the workers who were above the age of 50 lost their job. This led many domestic workers to take up alternative jobs like selling vegetables and other odd jobs to sustain their families during the pandemic.

It is important to note that entire families were rendered unemployed. For instance, construction work came to a standstill in cities during the ensuing lock-down and so entry into housing societies was also stopped. In this way, both male family members working in construction lost jobs, and so did the women who worked as domestic workers. Around 30 per cent had no money to survive during the lockdown period. Even after a standing order by the government to give full salary to the domestic workers in the summer of 2020, most of the employers ignored it, thus making the lives of domestic workers even more miserable during the lockdown. Indebtedness grew within families of domestic workers. Typically, a majority

¹⁵ Telephonic interview with Ms. Birola, domestic worker and member of Gharelu Kamgar Union, Gurgaon, 22 March 2021.

of the workers borrowed money from the local money lenders at high interest rates to sustain their lives during the pandemic (Shila 2020).

For a large number of domestic workers, the period of lockdown relaxation was also marked with constant struggle. Several workers were not re-employed as the lock-down gradually lifted. This was not only due to the fact that the domestic workers are demanding remuneration for the lock-down period, which many employers refuse to give but also because their employers fear that they are carriers of the virus (Banerjee 2020). The majority of employers are still haggling with workers over pending wages and over past cash advances, while in several instances the quantum of work extracted from recalled workers has enhanced although wages remain relatively the same (John 2020). Apart from using a firmly entrenched practice like restricting the entry of the workers into the residence or housing societies, some employers have simply blocked phone numbers and refused to take calls of domestic workers who are seeking reemployment with pending wages. Many who returned to work were greeted by lower wages as several employers claimed it was a hard to meet the old wage rates. However, burdened by debt and the need to pay rent for their living tenements, they were willing to take up the work at lower wages because for them earning something is better than nothing.

Running their own domestic households proved stupendous for these workers. Due to the cash crunch, they were not able to provide adequate food and other essentials to their children. As schools transitioned into the online mode of education, most domestic workers' households were not able to provide the infrastructure to their kids. In the worst case some of these kids were forced to stop the education due to the financial problems they are suffering from. Domestic workers also faced difficulties in meeting the health expenditure (Bhandari 2020). Moreover, with limited transportation and rising costs of local transport, there is a sizeable section of domestic workers that is simply forced to commute long distances on foot to get to places of work in housing societies. Strained by the economic ruination and intense malnutrition during the lockdown has forced many workers to take up work in even more exploitive conditions.

A sharp contradiction is clearly evident in the relationship between the predominantly female employers and female domestic workers. The disruption of paid domestic services during the lockdown has clearly brought to the forefront just how enmeshed class inequality is within the realities of gendered housework/domesticity. It became amply clear, for instance,

that with the lock-down and non-availability of domestic workers, upper classes of women were steadily pushed back into attending to the piling up housework in their homes. The conjuncture has clearly revealed the inadequacy of the ‘solution’ that affluent women have come to normalize through substituting their personal self with the domestic worker. Ultimately such substitution of mundane, back-breaking, undervalued housework has failed to displace the notion of gendered domesticity itself; hence, allowing for upper classes of women to be easily pushed into fulfilling the gender role in the ensuing lock-down (John 2020).

Having said this, it is erroneous to seek an equivalence in the burden that affluent women without ‘paid help’ faced, and the tyranny of unemployment, hunger, indebtedness and vulnerability unleashed on domestic workers. The pandemic and lockdown-triggered plight faced by domestic workers stemmed significantly from their working-class position, which firmly establishes just how precarious the informal sector is in India. Even in the 21st century the government has failed to frame a proper, comprehensive law that safeguards the informal workers from a crisis like this. In this light, it is expected to find organizations of domestic workers demanding the inclusion of such workers within the state’s social security net, wage regulation by the state, and registration of domestic workers as workers under the Labour Department.

Field work and data collection

For the field work, a total of nine people were interviewed. This sample consisted of six domestic workers and three subject experts. The experts included Dr. Neetha N, professor at Centre for Women’s Development Studies, New Delhi. She is the author of the edited volume, *Working at Others’ Homes – The Specifics and Challenges of Paid Domestic Work*, which highlights the life of domestic workers and the workplace relations through the angles of caste, class and gender. Her research provides a complex picture of the domestic work industry in India. Dr. Neetha N. proved important for our field work, given her extensive work on women’s labour force participation, work-related migration patterns, and her assessment of the domestic work industry with all its complexities and changing dynamics. Her critical analysis of the new Labour Codes, of the Welfare Board and its incapacity to deal with the issues of domestic workers has been crucial for our study. The interaction with Dr. Neetha N. threw light to many issues that persist in the industry since its rapid growth since the 1990s, such as overtime work, unpaid labour, child labour, physical and sexual exploitation of workers, the realities of the

post and pre-COVID situation of the domestic work industry, the changing caste composition of this workforce, and methods to formalize such work.

Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar is a Joint Labour Commissioner with the Government of West Bengal. As an official from the government, he represented a sympathetic official view of this workforce and prevailing conditions of heightened exploitation. His inputs were strategic for our field work since he is an academically and research-inclined labour administrator, who publishes frequently on labour concerns. Given his official background, access to official data, as well as the fact that he is posted in West Bengal which is one of the states that sources scores of cheap migrant domestic workers, made Dr. Sarkar a crucial source for our survey of conditions in the concerned industry.

Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar was able to explain the legal and procedural aspects of forming a trade union and its further functioning. From an administrative perspective, he was able to provide us an idea of the labour department's dealings with the informal sector, particularly the domestic work industry. Much needed information about minimum wage and the parameters that can be used to determine the same were detailed by him in our interactions.

The third subject expert whom we interviewed as part of our field work was Dr. Maya John, who is a trade union activist with Gharelu Kamgar Union (GKU); a union of domestic workers which is based in Delhi-NCR. As an active trade unionist, she was able to point out the structural faults in the approach of the state agencies when it came to dealing with the issues of domestic workers. During the course of our interactions with Dr. John, we were also exposed to the trade union perspective on the challenges of organizing an informal workforce, especially live-in domestic workers whose labour and personhood was easily invisibilized in a world of work dominated by employers. She explained the systemic reasons for the rampant exploitation faced by domestic workers in the workplace, the peculiar features of the employer–employee relationship of this industry, lack of regulation of this industry by the state, as well as the plight of domestic workers during COVID times. She also mentioned the importance of an organized trade union and how its activities facilitate in defending the interest of the workers.

Interviews were conducted with actual workers as well. Eight workers were interviewed telephonically for this purpose; five from Kerala and three from the Delhi-NCR. Workers from both the regions had somewhat varied experiences to share. To capture a spectrum of work relations in this industry, both live-in and live-out workers were interviewed. Documenting the experiences of domestic workers helped us to better comprehend the ground realities more

closely, especially the source of the workers' vulnerability, their perception of state (in)action, their entrapment within the employer's logic of this work relationship, etc. These interactions were also helpful in capturing the hardship borne from the period of lockdown in 2020 into even present times.

Most of the workers spoke vocally about the problems they faced during the COVID times, i.e., the cash crunch, shortage of food/ration, difficulty in meeting their children's requirements of online education, overnight unemployment, and the denial of salary during the lockdown period of 2020. Some noteworthy variations in experiences were soon discernible between what domestic workers in Kerala reported and that which workers in Delhi-NCR reported.

Some workers shared past experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace and the methods they used to deal with it. All the above interviews helped us in understanding the issues confronting the workforce in significant details. Many issues like overtime work, unpaid labour, exploitation at workplace, government negligence of domestic workers, structural failure in including domestic workers under the labour codes, minimum wages and post lockdown situation were clearly addressed during the interviews.

Analysis of data

(a) On the question of minimum wage:

On minimum wage, Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar gave a detailed explanation, and he was able to pinpoint the hurdles in determining minimum wage for a highly unorganized sector like paid domestic work. This apart, he also mentioned two different methods that can be adopted to determine such wages, i.e., on the basis of *time* and *piece rate*. Both these determinations have their own demerits.

Domestic work is a type of job where the time cannot be easily determined due to the predominantly informal arrangement between the worker and employer and *privatized* nature of the workplace. Given that the employer's household is the workplace, time fixation is difficult. When the minimum wage is determined using the time rate system, the employers typically specify the kind of work that needs to be completed within the specific time. Since it is an hourly payment, the employer demands to finish the work within the specified time, but in actual sense the worker may need more time to finish it. Due to the fact that the workers' idea of work is often different from that of the employers' idea of it, determining a wage on

the basis of piece rate is ridden with complications, and is usually difficult for the worker to negotiate. The piece rate arrangement depends upon the productivity of the worker. Nonetheless, how much one can work depends upon both the individual's productivity as well as the household/workplace's infrastructure. If the employer's household lacks certain infrastructure then the workers need to make additional efforts in completing the task. In this way, determining an effective wage in this sector is a challenge, unless the work relation and work process itself is not transformed. The sector is known for its highly unorganized nature and the configuration of the sector is based on what Samita Sen and Nilanjana Sengupta (2016) identify as "pragmatic intimacy" rather than a formal contractual employer–employee relationship.¹⁶ Thus, due to several non–market features of this work relation that are anchored in the personalized nature of the workplace/employer's home, it is quite difficult to set the minimum wage.

According to Dr. Sarkar, while determining the minimum wage for a highly unorganized sector like domestic work is really complex, proper regulations can aid in creating a uniform wage rate across the sector. Here the amendments to the labour law on minimum wages are important. Nevertheless, even though domestic workers are included in the schedule of the Minimum Wages Act in some of the states, still in most of the states the workers are not getting the guaranteed wage rate. A labour administrator like Dr. Kingshuk postulates that if trade unions were strong enough to raise the demands of the workers then the implementation of minimum wages would have been more effective. Some civil society groups and NGOs can be seen raising the demands of domestic workers such as a uniform wage rate across the sector. However, these organizations have less power when compared to the trade unions; due to which most of their demands are not recognized. According to Dr. Sarkar, uniform wages can be implemented if trade unions are more vocal about the issues of domestic workers. This appears as a common perception among labour administrators. While it is correct to identify the lack of unionization among this workforce as one of the important impediments to their access to entitlements, such perspectives also tend to slide into a victim-blaming of sorts and can be seen to selectively criticize established trade union formations for their 'neglect' of this workforce

¹⁶ Sen and Sengupta identify the paid domestic work relationship as based on "notions of intimacy" that indicate the importance of personal relations in negotiations over wage rates and non-wage benefits. These notions are "pragmatically constructed in order to establish a transactional surplus for the worker not only for the benefits they may derive, but also for granting a measure of dignity and humanity in a work that is otherwise menial and denigrating. Even when workers downplay the significance of wages, citing *affect* or *empathy*, they reveal an awareness of deprivation", and thus, a consciousness of class. See *Domestic Days*, pp.176-177.

while only fleetingly acknowledging the state's own role in the reinforcement of the workers' precarity.

(b) *Unionization:*

According to Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar, unionization has not really helped the domestic workers in raising their demands. There are registered unions but most of them are not active in discussing the issues of domestic workers. As per Dr. Maya John, there are trade unions which are active in certain regions but most of these are not pan-India organizations. In contrast to Dr. Sarkar, she explained that such trade unions have been crucial for wresting important rights and recognition for this workforce. If it were not for the collective presence of domestic workers, even the limited rights attained under the Minimum Wages Act, the extension of social security benefits, etc. would not have unfolded, given the larger thrust towards *deregulation* or withdrawal of the state from regulation of employer–employee relations (John 2021). Evidently, there are not many *registered* unions, given the stringent processing of registration applications by the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions (John 2021). Therefore, in many parts of the country the domestic workers are not organized into proper unions, and as a consequence, in these regions the workers are subjugated to very high levels of exploitation.

Unions which are unregistered are expectedly not involved in tripartite meetings and coordination managed by the Labour Department of various state governments. Their official invisibilization does not necessarily translate into powerlessness. Unregistered unions can have a strong presence among workers, who tend to report matters to such unions on a regular basis and conduct membership drives and locality-wise meetings to take unionization forward. In most instances, workers involve the union so as to claim pending wages, wrongful confinement, wrongful dismissal and 'no-entry'. Consequently, even without registration, local unionization efforts have a signalling effect for the wider workforce in locality, as well as for employers and the local police.

Having said this, the ever-expanding numbers of domestic workers, growing real estate market and spread of housekeeping companies that are displacing individual workers in some places, makes it difficult for unionized domestic workers to assert common demands. This has tendentially led to older migrant domestic workers being critical of newer migrant workers who accept lower wages and harsher working conditions in the desperate bid to make an entry into this job market (Birola 2021; John 2021). Another trend which has been in existence are spontaneous collective action, which trade unions are then called in to assist with. These

include instances of workers collecting outside housing societies to demand justice for a domestic worker who has been wronged as well as actual strike action, i.e., refusal to report to work until employers in the residential complex agree to some demands on pay revision, etc. (John 2021).

(c) Formalization of domestic work:

According to Dr. Neetha N., the formalization of domestic work can be achieved in two ways: (i) through the system of placement and formalized contracts; and (ii) through legislation. Placement and formalized contracts can address certain issues like underpayment, overtime work and some other kinds of exploitation. However, as Dr. Neetha N. notes, the contract system cannot fully formalize this sector. For one, the workers themselves are not able to individually negotiate a contract or its enforcement with ease due to the skewed power relationship between the employer and employee. This is also reflected in the tendency of domestic workers to underwrite/undervalue their own work/labour through the prism of informality and personalized relations. Moreover, placement agencies are very often party to human trafficking, and therefore, the contracts they forge in the name of the workers are often on dubious grounds.

Meanwhile, through labour regulations this sector can be formalized in more concrete ways. Proper laws and legislations can protect the workers from exploitation, guarantee them minimum wage and specify the time limit (Neetha N. 2021). These regulations will give the sector an identity or recognition and it will also provide them a platform to negotiate. However, according to Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar it is highly difficult to formalize this sector. Even if the government passes proper regulations to formalize the sector, these regulations can only be effective if and only if domestic work is recognized as a work. There then needs to be well-defined work relationship between the employer and employee to make the formalization more structured and realistically attainable. Needless to say, for such transformation of the domestic work relationship, piecemeal legislation will not suffice. This work and these workers need to be recognized by *all* existing landmark laws – a measure that will push the state into formal regulation of this burgeoning industry. Further, for actual enforcement of rights as employees, these workers need their collectives as the state alone has not and cannot be a sole guarantor of workers' entitlements (John 2021).

(d) Welfare boards and existing legislations

While domestic workers are covered under welfare boards and brought under the minimum wage legislation in some states, these are not implemented properly by the labour administration in most cases. In fact, with respect to the welfare boards, majority of domestic workers remain unregistered and thereby outside the ambit of welfare provisions. The deep crisis that domestic workers faced in the ensuing months of lockdown also reveal the hollowness of central government legislation like the Unorganized Workers Social Security Act, 2008, which had often been touted as a major move towards guaranteeing social security to informal workers, including domestic workers. These workers are not getting the actual benefits from these systems. Not surprisingly, while labour administrators play up the ‘benefits’ of welfare boards and social security legislation, scholars and activists criticize the government for ineffective welfare legislation.

Discussing the new Labour Codes, Dr. Neetha N. rightly pointed out that in the final stages of putting together the Code on Social Security, domestic workers were not included. Gig workers, media workers and many others were included, but not domestic workers. This, according to her, shows the political unwillingness in accepting domestic work as *work*; an exclusion stemming mainly from the nature of the workplace and the unorganized state of the workforce. Importantly, she also noted that even if laws and regulations are made, but still the workers do not recognize the value of their work, then there is no use in these regulations. So, there need to be steps taken to appreciate domestic work like any other work and to recognize its skill component. Taking this argument forward, it is imperative that for domestic work to gain a formal recognition and higher value in the labour market, the privatised regulation by employers of wages and other core components of the work relationship are replaced by state regulation. Bringing the state into this domain of work relations will go a long way in transforming the nature of this work, and in turn, how workers and employers perceive this work (John 2021).

Another legislation which has been often highlighted is the inclusion of domestic workers under the Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. However, closer scrutiny of this legislation shows that it fits well with the current paradigm of deregulation. The Act empowers private employers to nominate committees for the investigation and adjudication of sexual harassment complaints, irrespective of employers’ own role in harbouring work conditions that fuel workers’ vulnerability. In the case of the domestic work industry, this translates into Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) being designated as an authority for formation of such committees in their respective residential

complexes, which is irony considering their role in enforcing employers' interests and dominance.

(e) *The question of traditional labour*

When interviewing domestic workers, we noticed that the women who belonged to the Dalit community claimed to take up the job as domestic workers because their family has in past performed such work. They explained that since they did not have any formal education they could not choose other jobs, and thus, automatically opted for this work. This shows that many women in lower rung jobs are caught in the vicious circle of traditional labour which they have inherited. The stigma attached to this work was also evident when other project group members shared how impoverished women garment workers hesitate to take up paid housework even though they can earn the same or more from such work in Delhi-NCR than as garment workers. They see paid housework as an “odd job” that is degrading.¹⁷

The societal perceptions and current functioning of the economy do allow ‘lower’ caste women trapped in stigmatized, hard manual work to choose other professions. The caste system stands reinforced as *limited* educational opportunities and employment generation tend to predetermine the (non)access that vulnerable socio-economic groups have to higher rungs in the labour market (John 2021). The stratification of occupations on the basis of caste and crowding of lower rung jobs by the labouring poor from Dalit and adivasi communities translates into their persistent lack of access to development and social upliftment.

(f) *Overwork under the garb of benevolence*

In the interview sessions it appeared that most of the workers expressed that their workload was not an overburden and that they are satisfied with the amount of work they did. Even live-in workers claimed that their workload was normal. At the same time all the workers shared that they have a highly informal work arrangement in the employer's household. An oft-repeated expression of the Keralite workers was that they are treated as a family member rather than a worker. Critical scrutiny of the above statements indicates that under a highly informal work structure it would be difficult for the worker to set a prescribed time and fix the type of work extracted. The greater the assertion of informal relations for extraction of work, the more distant contractual work relations become. Most of the workers are willing to take up extra work or work for more time as they are trapped under the garb of the employer's familial

¹⁷ Point borrowed from Lalsi Devi's interview, conducted by Archita Agarwal, March 2021.

benevolence, or basically, the informal relations asserted by employers. Here the workers are undervaluing their work as under a family-like work structure the extra work/chores extracted by them are not taken into account. In other words, the workers are seen to agree to often work for more time because the employer–employee relationship is based on a ‘pragmatic intimacy’ rather than a formal well-defined work relation.

It was noted that most of the workers were satisfied with their wages and claimed that they are getting a fair wage. Nonetheless, it was noted that some workers were working apart from domestic work, with some seeking employment under the MGNREGA scheme. This shows that even when they claim of getting a fair wage they are often looking for alternative employment to substantiate their earnings from paid domestic work. All the above facts show how the projected employer benevolence acts as an invisible hurdle for the domestic workers, such that the workers themselves are often dismissive of the extent of their exploitation. These instances highlight the necessity of a formal well-defined work structure in the domestic work industry.

(g) Wage stagnation and exploitation

Most of the workers interviewed were into this profession for 10 years or more. When their wages in the initial stages were compared with the current ones, it was clear that there has not been any substantial increase and there is stagnation of wage. One worker in Kerala, for example, shared that in her initial days received a salary of INR 3000/- per month, and even after 12 years this salary amount increased by only INR 5000/-. She currently earns INR 8000/- per month. This shows that even after taking into account all the inflation and other economic changes, the increase in wages has been sluggish and insufficient. Importantly, some workers even shared that in the initial stages of work, they were provided with kind rather than cash.

It was further observed that some workers faced very intense exploitation in their workplace. Even when *institutions* employ domestic workers, these workers face high exploitation. One worker from Kerala, for instance, recounted her exploitation in religious and charitable institution where she was made to work much more than she had agreed to.

(h) Formal v/s informal work pattern

It was noted that one of the workers interviewed had previously worked as a domestic worker; a job she had given up so as to become an anganwadi worker. She amply explained the difference in the work regime that she experienced in both the sectors. As a domestic worker

she claimed that she did not get sufficient leaves, there was heavy workload, regular extraction of overtime work, no social security benefits, and the work structure was highly fragile and informal. However, as an anganwadi worker, her work pattern changed significantly. There was a defined time of work, the nature of work was well-prescribed, there was no overtime work and heavy workload, sufficient leaves could be availed, and she gained access to important social security benefits.

(i) Major difficulties faced by the workers during the lockdown

The following were some important findings with respect to the impact of the lockdown in 2020:

1. **Cash crunch:** Both the workers in Kerala and Delhi-NCR shared that they faced intense cash crunch. Most of the interviewed workers faced severe shortage in money. All the members in the workers' households were into informal sector employment, so during the lockdown most of them lost their jobs. Even though some domestic workers got salary during lockdown, they were not able to meet the needs of their family with their own wage. To meet the needs of their families, a majority of them borrowed money from local moneylenders at a high interest rate, and now they are trying hard to pay back the interest. Some workers were also not provided salary during the lockdown and their situation was really miserable.
2. **Food shortage:** Domestic workers of Delhi-NCR highlighted a major problem in accessing food supplies. By end April/early May 2020, they had run out of savings and were not easily able to get ration due to the lack of ration cards with their current city address, as well as due to the shortage of money. In contrast, we noted that the workers in Kerala did not experience such a food crisis because they were provided ration on a monthly basis for free by the local government.
3. **Difficulty in meeting online education and other basic needs:** Most of the workers reported difficulty in meeting the needs of online education of their children. They did not have the adequate resources to meet the online mode. They also faced difficulty in paying the rent, electricity and other basic needs.
4. **Transportation:** After the relaxation of lockdown by 1 June 2020, workers faced difficulty in commuting to workplaces where some employers were willing to hire them back. Since there was not enough public transportation, most of them walked long distances to the workplace. For some, the distance was so long that they opted an auto

rickshaw to commute, which increased their cost of transportation. For instance, for one worker, it cost INR 30/- per day for travel (in bus), but due to lack of public transportation she had to spend INR 300/- per day for travel (auto rickshaw).

5. Leaving the city: Some workers from Delhi-NCR reported how they witnessed many domestic workers leave the city along with their families as the lockdown stretched out and subsequent months saw little hiring back (Birola 2021). Several though not all migrant workers migrated back to their villages. The workers who left the cities did so in desperation, given the loss of employment, combined with the need to meet expenditures of rent, food, loans taken, as well as the overall hostility of the city and fear of contracting the contagion. Even those who stayed back in the city did so due to the sheer lack of resources that could facilitate their travel. As of now, many who returned to their villages have not yet migrated back to the city due to reports of the paucity of employment (John 2021). Meanwhile, some workers among migrant domestic workers who stayed back in the city have gradually returned to their villages over the past six to eight months since employment opportunities have not picked up while costs of living have only increased (Birola 2021).

When the Kerala and Delhi-NCR workers are compared, certain differences are discernible. It appeared that most of the workers from Kerala got their salaries during the lockdown whereas in case of Delhi-NCR, a large component of workers was not provided with salary.¹⁸ Shortage of food was not experienced by Kerala workers because most of them got ration on a monthly basis from the PDS for free. The Delhi-NCR workers did not have easy access to ration mainly due to the fact that their ration cards were of their native place rather than of the city, and the e-ration card services showcased by the district administration as a ‘solution’ to the ration woes of migrant workers actually failed to be properly implemented (Afiya 2021).

Conclusion

With the imposition of another lockdown from mid-April 2021 onwards in many states, we can only imagine the kind of hardship must have unfolded for domestic workers in the country. The discontinuation of MNREGA by some state governments in the bid to control the contagion, restrictions on vehicular movement, conversion of primary healthcare centres into

¹⁸ As explained by Ms. Priya who works in Gurgaon, foreign employers reportedly continued to pay salaries for the period of lockdown in 2020 and domestic workers in their employ faced a problem only when these employers returned to their countries.

vaccination centres and government hospitals into COVID-19 treatment centres, among many other measures are wreaking havoc for the precariously placed urban poor; many of whom are migrant labourers in domestic work, construction, etc. The dismal situation will expectedly facilitate even more exploitation of informal workers, who will be forced to settle for worse working conditions to meet bare subsistence.



Construction Workers in India and their Grief-stricken Exodus Post Lockdown

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Overview

The construction industry is considered as the second largest sector of the Indian economy after agriculture. This industry provides employment to an approximate of six crore workers, who are engaged in informal work contracts and are largely unorganized. Despite existing policies and laws, such as the Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment & Conditions of Service) Act, 1996; Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Cess Act, 1996 and Rules 1998; Inter- State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment & Conditions of Service) Act,1979; etc., which were formulated in order to provide safety and better working conditions to such workers, the ground assessments of the construction industry reflect the inadequacy of the legal provisions and lax implementation of the pro-worker provisions. In this way, the needs and demands of construction workers are far from resolved.

Studies show the prevalence of a vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation wherein a large number of construction workers are forcefully pushed by "*thekedaars*" (contractors) into low-paying construction jobs in India that allow for little upward mobility. As noted by a woman construction worker: "I have been building peoples' houses for 30 years but I and my family still live in a rented shanty slum" (Report of the Centre of Equity Studies 2019). Unfortunately, the precarious conditions of scores of women construction workers and their families prevailed in the pre-lockdown period, and further deteriorated during the lockdown period which was announced on a "four-hour notice" by the Central Government of India on the night of 24th March 2020.

Prior to the lockdown of 2020 there existed many issues pertaining to the rampant exploitation of building and other construction workers (henceforth BOCW), and to their lack of access to social security. One of the pertinent issues in the pre-lockdown period stemmed from the extremely limited legal registration of these workers, i.e., the provision by which they can be made eligible beneficiaries of welfare schemes granted by the government, including the Construction Workers' Welfare Fund. Notably, to protect such workers, the BOCW Act of 1996 provides for regulation of employment and conditions of service of the workers as also

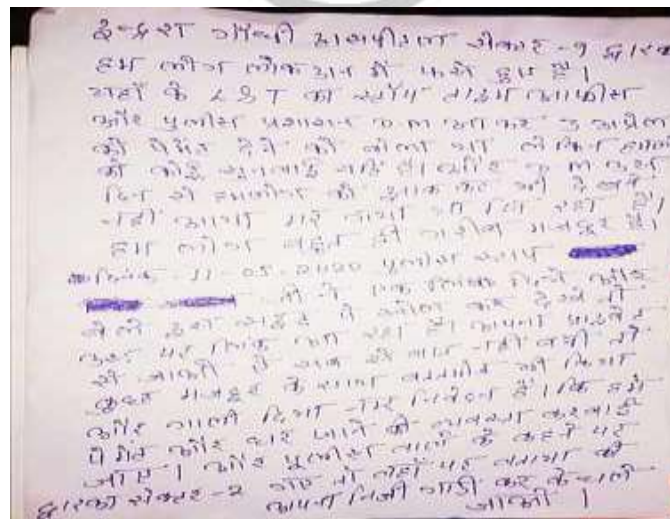
of their safety, health and welfare in every establishment which employs ten or more workers. The BOCW Act, however, also strategically allows for exemption, such as it exempts from its purview the construction of residential houses for personal purpose and of a cost not exceeding INR 10 lacs.

The provisions in the Act for health and safety measures for the construction workers are in consonance with the International Labour Organisation's Convention No.167 concerning safety and health in the construction sector. Along with this, there is also a provision in the BOCW Act for the establishment of safety committees in every company employing 500 or more workers with equal representation from workers and employers in addition to appointment of safety officers qualified in the field. It also specifies the penalties of fine and imprisonment for violation and contravention of the BOCW Act. Another crucial component is the creation of Welfare Boards constituted under the Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996, in every state of India to exercise the powers conferred on, and perform the functions assigned to it. The welfare boards are very important (a) to provide immediate assistance to a beneficiary in case of accident; (b) to make payment of pension to the beneficiaries who have completed the age of sixty years; (c) to sanction loans and advances to a beneficiary for construction of a house not exceeding such amount and on such terms and conditions as enlisted; (d) to give such financial assistance for the education of children of the beneficiaries as enlisted; (e) to meet the medical expenses for the treatment of major ailments of a beneficiary or, such dependent; (f) to make payment of maternity benefit to the female beneficiaries; and (g) to make provision and improvement of such other welfare measures and facilities.

Pre-existing inadequate access to registration and other protective provisions of the two key legislations of 1996 were very vividly exposed during the lockdown period. Lack of awareness about the registration through which workers could avail benefits, both at ordinary days (pre lockdown), during the lockdown and post lockdown, rendered these migrant construction workers with little food, precious or no shelter, and no income. A Press Trust of India (PTI) news report on 17 May 2020 amply depicted the tragedy of migrant workers. The article reports "*Grief tears us apart, and sometimes unites us too,*" which were the words of a construction labourer who was trapped in Delhi, far away from his family in Bihar, during the lockdown of 2020, but fortunately met a neighbour from the same village (also a migrant construction worker) at the Begusarai Quarantine centre. Both of these construction workers

were filled with grief as they were trapped in these huge cities, which abandoned them in no time. The same construction worker states that *"The rich will get all the help, getting rescued and brought home in planes from abroad. But we poor migrant labourers have been left to fend for ourselves. That is the worth of our lives"*. He added that, *"Hum mazdooron ka koi desh nahin hota"* (We labourers do not belong to any country) (The Hindu 2020).

This was just one instance that managed to reach out to the world through the media, unfortunately there were several such construction labourers who spent days in grief and uncertainty, while being trapped in the cities they worked day and night to build. Such instances that display the woes of the construction workers during the lockdown supposedly exposed the lack of governance and the lack of commitment the government has towards the poor. Construction workers were coerced into *not* leaving the cities, but at the same time these workers were neither provided with their due wages nor the promised ration kits by the government. This apathy prominently came forth when over 250 migrant workers were stranded for over 50 days at the site of an under-construction hospital in Delhi being built by Larsen and Toubro (L&T). These poor migrant construction workers made an emotional appeal for help and issued a letter pleading to the authorities to help them go back to their native villages.



(Image source - NH Political Bureau, 2020)

The image displays the letter issued by the trapped migrant construction workers in Delhi seeking help from the authorities.

The migrant construction workers demanded the payment of salary due to them and alleged that the company, with the help of the local administration, put them in a “*detention like situation*”. In other words, despite many efforts, they were not being allowed to go to their native places. Furthermore, these migrant labourers said that on April 3, “the staff of L&T and some police personnel came to us and they promised to give us our salary. However, we have not received our salary yet”. They said that L&T had provided them with rations initially but then eventually they were asked to manage it themselves after the lockdown was extended. They also said “We went to the DM office located in Sector 10, Dwarka, demanding evacuation. But the administration refused to help us, citing the lockdown. But after we staged a protest, they gave our salary till March,” he said. When asked about the financial help promised by the AAP government in Delhi, the workers claimed that they have not received any help so far either from the Central government or from the AAP government (NH Political Bureau 2020). This exemplified how the pathetic situation of such migrant labourers is perpetuated by inefficient, anti-worker governance.

A similar incident with the same apathy was reported from Hyderabad, where agitated construction workers employed in IIT-Hyderabad, who were trapped there due to the lockdown, went on a rampage inside the campus, demanding their pending March and April wages as well as the right to return to their native places. They complained that in the wake of the lockdown, they had not been paid and were starving. On 29 April, their pitched battle against the local police and officials of the L&T construction company facilitated emergency talks and the release of March’s wages. The public actions of migrant workers gradually compelled the Central and state governments to grudgingly make arrangements for their safe return to their home states. In line with these developments the first train with a group of construction workers departed on 1 May 2020 from Hyderabad.

Both of the aforementioned confrontations involving construction workers stem from the uncertainties brought on by the lockdown, particularly the loss of employment, and the denial of wages. The filthy conditions in shelters and the overall poor quality and inadequate arrangements of food made by the governmental authorities have also added to the plight of migrant workers. Trapped in crowded, unhygienic shelters or makeshift tenements at their workplaces, construction workers and many other migrant labourers are on the brink of starvation, especially as their meagre savings have long been spent. Indeed, the uncertainty of

survival and sustenance in alien, hostile cities have made many migrant workers desperate to return to the relative security of their native places (John 2020).

Another index through which the hollowness of the state's claims of being pro-poor, pro-migrant labour has been well exposed is the incompleteness and paucity of official data. The ridiculously low figures quoted by various state governments with respect to construction workers who were provided welfare during the lockdown months revealed the fallacy of working solely with the dismal online registration figures of these workers. The much larger number of unregistered construction workers simply disappeared from the official discourse. The fumbling process of online registration of construction workers is amply captured in the case of the Delhi government, which claims to have a transparent system, but has not updated its website since 2015 (NH Political Bureau 2020). For reference an image is inserted below.



(Image source - National Herald, 2020)

The Delhi government's website which hasn't been updated with recent information since 2015.

This reflects just how careless the governments have been while claiming to record and register construction workers of the construction industry. As per the government records, there are an approximate of 3.5 crore construction workers in India, but expectedly, trade unions organizing these workers have shared that the actual number is as high as nine crores. The multitude of figures, and that too drastically varying ones, reflect the poor management of monitoring of this industry by various state governments, and the incompleteness of the state's registration drive. Ultimately, the contrasting figures reflect huge gaps between registered

figures and the actual workforce on the ground, and thus, a fundamental problem with the registration process itself. If the registration process was really effective then migrant workers like those in construction would not have been compelled to walk home to their villages. It goes without saying that state officials neither have the data pertinent to the number of migrant construction workers who walked back to their homes, nor do they have the data on the workers who died while walking. This stance is just one manifestation of the overall negligent attitude of the state when it comes to this labour force – a discomfiting reality which has prevailed long before the pandemic-cum-lockdown.

Ajit Jha (EPW 2020) rightly asserts that the most vulnerable workers are the unorganized workers such as construction workers who are not registered formally. In India only 3.48 crore construction workers are registered, while only 2.57 crore of these workers are considered "Alive" through the renewal. Jha points out some of the loopholes that have gradually led in the decline of registrations of these construction workers; some reasons being the shift of counter-based registration to online registration, the shift from a 4-page form to a 12-page form, the renewal process of this registration by the construction workers every three years, and lastly the corrupt practices by which selectively only a few construction workers are made part of the state's database. The rampant corruption while collecting funds, ineffective implementation of schemes and the improper utilization of funds for these construction workers under the BOCW Act has also been put forth as the prime reasons as to why most construction workers have not received any benefits during the lockdown period.

Himanshu Upadhyaya (Caravan 2020) mentions how the BOCW welfare boards had over INR 52,000 crores as funds, out of which states had already earmarked some welfare operations leaving INR 31,000 crores as the total corpus out of which less than INR 5,000 crores has been utilised for the welfare of the construction workers during the lockdown for 'COVID relief'. He writes: "Of the 53 million construction workers in India, nearly half are not registered with BOCW boards, and only a third received cash benefits during the lockdown."

Notably, the hierarchical structure of the construction industry is equally questionable, with construction workers unaware of who their real employer is? Is it the "Thekedar" or "Contractor" that helps them migrate from one state to another for work, or is it the subcontracting companies that hire construction workers? This hierarchy enabled a blame game

between the two parties, while paying wages to the construction workers during the lockdown period.

A survey report by Jan Sahas (Trivedi 2020) states that a few middlemen/contractors paid the construction workers by dipping into their own pockets, which gradually stopped. Unable to access free ration kits and cash transfers, these construction workers left for a journey back to their villages, with young children, men and women but on foot. Many families lost their lives during this journey. Many women construction workers were harassed on their way back to their villages,. A large number of men and women construction workers also faced the brutality of the police. Notably, this was not something new, for construction workers even during the pre-lockdown period were subjected to such kinds of brutality either by their contractors or the subcontracting companies.

A little silver lining can be seen in the struggle of construction workers through collective mobilization and protests during the lockdown period (John 2020). In fact, food riots and worker–police conflicts were reported from various parts of the country such as Hyderabad, Surat, Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, etc. where informal workers were being forced to stay in cities without any wages and access to ration/cooked food. Such conflicts built the pressure on the state authorities to make arrangements for migrant workers to return to their villages.

Importantly, it was the interests of employers more than the plight of stranded workers that influenced the partial lifting of lockdown by May 2020. The Standard Operations Protocol (SOP) that subsequently came into force enabled the resumed production in various industries and agriculture. It ensured that the workers to be screened, “skill-mapped” and moved as per the needs of employers’ lobbies, rather than being screened and safely transported home (John 2020).

This evidently exemplifies how construction workers and informal workers at large have limited liberties and rights and thus they are compelled to do whatever their employers ask them to do. The elite employers often join hands with state authorities, who help them get away from any fines or complaints through bribery. The tussle between the employers and the workers was prevalent even before the lockdown, it was during the lockdown specifically, when these workers decided to retaliate back.

Prior to lockdown women construction workers had no access to maternity leave or supportive facilities like a workplace creche wherein they were given some quality time and safe space with their children. Instead, it is common to find heavily pregnant women construction workers at work sites, as well as women workers carrying their new born babies to the construction site. Medical emergencies of the construction workers have not been taken seriously by contractors. Chitra Rawat and Priyansha Singh (Scroll 2020) trace out how contractors ruthlessly cut workers' wages if they are late/absent for work even due to medical reasons. Apart from this, there is no board or committee to which women construction workers can make complaints against sexual harassment at the workplace. Most of such instances of harassment would be brushed under the carpet as women might. The masons at construction sites often have a team of men and women working under them, they usually prefer to employ younger women whom they may exploit sexually. This insecure nature of employment, particularly for women, creates a vicious trap in which women are often forced to please a subcontractor in order to get work.

Workers are also employed for construction works from the *chowk* or *naka* i.e., a crossing or any other open place within a busy market area which acts like an informal employment exchange where workers stand around in hopes of getting work for the day. Women who wait in the chowks often find themselves leered at by employers and are subjected to various indignities. Contractors prefer younger women, both because they can work faster and because they are more attractive. Sexual exploitation is rife, given the insecurity of a daily wage system. Along with this, the constant pressure of 'Double Burden' amid the women construction workers. Women's multiple tasks are not recognized and their abilities are undervalued, leading to a biased, gendered understanding of their potential, capabilities and work intensities at home and in the workplace. In a construction worker's household, tasks are rarely shared (Kumar 2021). It is exclusively the burden of the women of the house to cook and feed the family. Apart from this, other duties such as fetching water, procuring fuel and food, meeting expenses of school fees if the child/children are school-going; meeting the medical expenses if there are older members in the family who need medical attention, and such other exigencies are all solely a woman's responsibility.

As per the case study of Pinky, a migrant construction worker, enlisted under the report of National Commission for Women (2005), construction work is the only kind of work left open to *seasonal* migrants like them. The work is very strenuous, and women workers like

Pinky often have had to lift loads of 100 kilograms. The workers who participated in the NCW's study reported to be mostly involved in public related construction work such as building roads, public utilities, toilets, metro stations, garbage pits, etc. The construction workers describe that sometimes they have to vomit because of the stench of the garbage at the construction sites.

Additionally, the workers documented in the NCW's study reported to have had to work very long hours. They reported that the shift begins at about 9:00 a.m. and finishes only at about 5:00 p.m., with just a one hour's lunch break. Often they were also made to work after 5:00 p.m., and sometimes even all night till 5:00 a.m. the next day, without rest. They get overtime after 5:00 p.m., depending on how long after that they have to work. The night shift, according to these workers, may cost the contractor INR 135. Overall, on an average, the *munshi* pays INR 65 for a day's labour and every week these migrant construction workers get about INR 200 per labourer for rations, living expenses etc. In other words, *partial* rather than full wages payment was characteristic. They often collect their total dues and leave for the village. Generally, these workers do not get any leave. The *munshi* informs them a day in advance when there is work and a tempo comes to collect them in the morning. They do not get any food or water, instead they pack their own food and take to the site. For drinking water, they have to ask the people nearby or else find a tap to drink from.

The plight that construction workers faced during the pre-lockdown period continued and even worsened during the lockdown period. As per Jan Sahas's survey, most construction workers had debts or loans to pay back, but all of them were uncertain as to how will they pay back these loans, even when they were to start working. Post lockdown, the exploitation does not appear to have stopped. Such distress jars with the claims of state governments about extension of relief. For example, construction workers were amongst the first category of labourers in the unorganized sector for whom the Delhi government announced a one-time compensation of INR 5000 each, for loss of income on account of the lockdown (NH Political Bureau 2020). Sources say that only about 40,000 of them could get this cash transfer into their account because most of the labour migrated to and fro from their state of origin to their state of work. In May 2020, the Delhi government allowed resumption of construction on the condition that the labour stays at the site, but by the end of March-April most of the construction workers had left for their villages and construction sites and buildings remained empty with no work going on.

Vijaya Pushkarna (Firstpost 2020) reports that the lockdown hit hard especially for the small manufacturing unit owners who were awaiting the return of labour who had gone back to Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Many small machine part manufacturers in the Jhilmil industrial area in East Delhi were awaiting the return of labour to complete their long pending orders. In cases where the labourers returned back, the Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) would not allow outside workers to enter homes even for repairing work. Some members of RWAs were even pressing for a total ban on domestic workers, drivers, mechanics, including electricians and plumbers, etc. Given such drying up of employment and persistently low employment levels even with the lifting of lockdown, almost all the labourers were scared of returning back to the cities. Those who did not return to their native villages could be seen on the pavement across the Mother Dairy booth on Sahni Road between Delhi and Ghaziabad, and every morning almost 200 labourers post lockdown would gather there waiting for customers who would give them a livelihood (Pushkarna 2020). High-rise construction works restarted in Greater Noida, where the manager at one such site said that while the number of workers at the site was a third of what it was before March 2020, they were able to get back most of their labourers because the contractor sent buses to villages in Jharkhand to bring them back (Pushkarna 2020).

A new trend that developed after the lockdown was that builders began offering a property swap scheme to buyers in stalled projects, and providing them an option to switch to another property if they are ready to pay at least 70 per cent of the price of the new property. Realty portal *realtynxt.com* reported that builders like Supertech and Bhutani were coming up with such swap schemes and brokerage firms were acting as intermediaries between buyers and developers. Though some construction activity resumed at areas like the Pragati Maidan in Delhi, i.e., where a huge redevelopment project came to a grinding halt in March, and even some road work resumed after being abandoned for the past six months, contractors claimed that government guidelines about reduced workforce and social distancing has halted most activity. Project managers almost everywhere voice the same claim that there is a shortage of construction labour (Pushkarna 2020). The slow trickling back of workers is to a significant extent due to the fear harboured by migrant workers back in their villages, that the happenings of March-May 2020 will repeat themselves. Nevertheless, rampant rural distress and dispossession has also pushed segments of the most impoverished migrant labourers to gradually return to work in the cities.

Returning workers in unorganized sectors like construction are of course victims of heavy exploitation as businesses struggle to restart operations. Indeed, post lockdown, the workers in India are set to face longer days and lower pay in a “race to the bottom.” Academics, activists and unions have argued this in the light of several states namely Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana; announcing plans to suspend the existing labour laws to help industry recover from the coronavirus-triggered lockdown. Under such pronouncements, shift timings in the six states were legally extended from eight hours to 12 hours for a specific period notified. These measures also suspend the legislation guaranteeing minimum wages and the formation of workers’ unions for up to three years, in the case of some states (Thomson Reuters Foundation 2020). Other social security benefits including welfare funds or provisions for the health and safety of women employees would also be waived in some states. Officials in the six states say the measures will help local industries to bounce back and reverse losses incurred during the weeks of lockdown, and also lure new investment. However, on the part of the construction workers and other buildings labourers the increase of working hours is a ruthless legalization of their over exploitation, especially given the arduous nature of manual construction work, along with of course the zero guarantee of the minimum wages.

To illustrate the aforementioned point, it is perhaps apt to turn to the example of Rahul Ahirwar, a construction worker in northern Haryana state, which is one of the six states that plans to extend the working day. In his statement recorded in the Thomson Reuter 2020 report, Ahirwar explained that he is expected to work more hours for less pay when he returns to his job, and this he believed was regardless of the labour law suspension. Ahirwar stated: “We work 10 hours in any case...It’s going to be difficult from here on. Our employers have had no income. How will they pay us?”

Trade union leaders claimed that these state governments had given businesses a green light to exploit workers. As per the Australia-based Walk Free Foundation's 'Global Slavery Index' (2018), India has eight million modern slaves, and bonded labour is the most prevalent form of slavery in the country. Labour experts argue that for workers already enduring poor conditions prior to the lockdown, things are deemed to get far worse. “In most of the unorganised sector, the work hours are by default 12 hours and now the employer will extend it to 15,” said Anoop Satpathy, faculty at the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute (Thomson Reuter 2020). Even within the country’s labour administration there are some voices of concern

with respect to recent suspensions of statutory labour laws by state governments. “This (suspension of laws) will push many to poverty,” said the former head of the labour ministry’s panel on minimum wages (Thomson Reuters 2020; Srivastava & Nagaraj 2020). The post lockdown period very evidently has not been fortunate for the already existing poor workers, instead the situation has become worse for them.

Field work and data collection

In order to gather crucial data pertinent to the aforementioned information, interviews were conducted with a labour administrator, Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar, and with a trade unionist, Comrade Alok Kumar. Due to the surge in COVID-19 cases, these interviews were conducted in a virtual manner, i.e., through Google Meet and through telephonic conversation.

The first interview was conducted with Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar via Google Meet. Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar is working as a Joint Labour Commissioner with the Government of West Bengal and began his academic life focusing initially on plantation workers but gradually went on to research on the country’s large informal sector and labour laws. He has an experience of 22 years of working as a labour administrator. Dr. Sarkar closely working with the labour ministry of West Bengal was able to lend important information about the existing schemes and government policies for the workers in the informal sector, such as construction workers.

The questions for the interview with Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar was framed in a manner to get an in depth understanding of how the construction industry has worked over the years and how it worked during and after the lockdown period. The questions ranged from issues touching on the vulnerability of construction workers and the plight of women construction workers specifically to the government schemes and administrative functioning with regard to the construction industry. The main purpose of interviewing Dr. Sarkar was that being a labour department administrator a deeper understanding could be derived in our study with respect to specific issues like labour administrative approaches, efficiency of implementation of protective and welfarist labour legislation by governments, official statistics on labour in the informal sector, etc.

Dr. Sarkar categorically stated that construction workers, despite migrating to urban areas in large numbers, are completely unaware of the registration processes of the state governments and the existing structure of welfare policies. He also pointed out to the gender profile of the construction workforce. He explained how the number of women construction

workers is relatively lower due to the biased approach of the contractors. Majority of contractors purposely avoid hiring women construction workers because their employment mandates provision of certain specific facilities such as separate toilets, etc. Often contractors are hesitant in spending money for such separate facilities. However, the construction industry is large and there are alternative trends also visible whereby the cheap labour of rural migrants with their female family members are put to work in some construction sites. In this regard, Dr. Sarkar pointed out the other flip side of female employment in construction, which is lower wages in comparison to male construction workers, and regular extraction of extra hours. Speaking of women construction workers, he pointed out that women construction workers are an easy target for contractors and masons working at construction sites. Sexual harassment at construction sites is rampant but mostly it goes unreported.

For specifically the lockdown period in 2020, he further argued about the existing administrative gap which affected those working in the informal sector. This was accompanied by a skewed process of extending the provision of ration kits and money transfers to informal workers who were registered with the government. However, most of the country's informal workers are not registered with the government. This was the main reason why a large section of the informal workers (who were already poor) were pushed into abject poverty; first, with the robbing of their livelihoods, and secondly with the denial of their entitlement over the economy in terms of unobstructed access to state welfare.

The second interview was conducted telephonically with Comrade Alok, who is the Sangyojak (Convenor) of the Delhi Nirman Mazdoor Sangharsh Samiti, which is affiliated to All India Workers' Unity Centre (AIWUC). With about 2,700 members their organisation is spread across the states of Haryana, Delhi and Western Uttar Pradesh. Their centre of focus shifted to the plight of construction workers back in 2010 with the construction boom triggered by the Commonwealth Games hosted in Delhi. Comrade Alok has been very active in mobilizing the voice of these workers within the trade union movement, and has written about the plight of construction workers like the unfortunate accident of the construction workers working at the JLN stadium in Delhi.

The questions formulated for Comrade Alok took into account the experiences of construction workers at construction sites, major forms of exploitation within the industry, the lack of supervision and safety measures for the workers, the lack of stability and social security with regard to the administrative structure of schemes and policies, the inadequate to zero

implementation of policies and basic facilities and lastly the vicious cycle of poverty and precarity revolving amid the life of an Indian construction worker. The prime reason for conducting an interview with a trade unionist was to better comprehend the on-the-ground realities of construction labour. In this regard, Comrade Alok's interaction proved vital, given his experience of working at the grassroots level with construction workers belonging to Delhi-NCR and some parts of Uttar Pradesh. Through his lived experience, he was able to provide us a detailed overview of the grievances of construction workers. He succeeded in detailing how these grievances have long existed before lockdown, and the cruel way the plight of scores of construction workers unfolded during and post lockdown. Moreover, Comrade Alok unabashedly revealed the inefficiency of the labour and district administrations in providing relief to the workers of the informal sector, especially migrants like construction workers.

The two aforementioned resource persons were posed questions that were broadly divided into three categories, i.e., the pre-lockdown period, the lockdown period, and the post-lockdown period. This was done to assess the difficulties faced by the construction workers by taking a longer view and not one restricted to the March to May 2020 period of actual lockdown. Due to the restricted physical movement and the time limitations, the interview with Dr. Sakshi Khurana, who is working with NITI AAYOG, could not be conducted. The second surge of COVID-19 cases also prevented any visits to construction sites and face-to-face interactions with construction workers.

Fieldwork analysis

The data mentioned below has been gathered while interviewing Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar and Comrade Alok:

(a) Average conditions before lockdown & critique of the existing legal framework

The construction and building industry, being the *second largest sector* of the Indian economy, employs a large section of our society. When we talk about the total number of construction workers in India, there is ironically no exact figure on how many such workers are working in the industry. As per the Union Labour Ministry, there are about 5.1 crore construction workers, but various alternative sources such as that of unions, advocacy groups, and NGOs have recorded that there are almost nine crore construction workers in India. The statistics could vary but one thing is fixed, which is that the total number of construction workers is not less than six crores.

The Central government so far has registered only 3.5 crore construction workers while the others remain unrecognized. It was pointed out by Dr. Sarkar that there is no definite number due to the lack of documentation and the informal nature of employment in the construction industry. From lack of awareness and lack of access to resources for online registration to a prolonged procedure which involves signatures of employers, the registration process has proven an onerous task for construction workers. “As such there is no awareness about the online registration process amongst the construction workers, almost 80 per cent of the construction workers have no information about the registration process with the government,” claims Dr. Sarkar.

Besides this, the construction workers who might be aware of such registrations mostly do not know how to access the online portals and fill the form. Labour registration is a problem in itself for poor construction workers, who are mostly not aware of this legal procedure. Even if some construction workers organize themselves and inquire about the registration procedure, they do not have the required internet or smartphones to register themselves. To enable a pragmatic approach to this issue, Comrade Alok correctly argued that instead of labourers going to government offices or navigating online portals, it should be that labour inspectors who should visit construction sites and register all the construction workers. In other words, for protective and welfare legislation to be in the reach of declared beneficiaries, a proactive role of the state machinery is a must. This approach was especially emphasized by our trade union contact, given the amendments made by the government in the registration procedure. With the shift of the registration process to the online mode, more construction workers have been left unregistered, and this anomaly requires official recognition.

Furthermore, when we talk about how far are the construction workers are unionized in India, a comparative perspective with several other countries indicates that it is extremely low. Of the overall factory labour force in India, only six per cent is organized. In other words, India has the lowest trade union density in the entire world when compared to the trade union density of advanced nations such as France (60 to 70 per cent); USA (90 per cent), etc. Such dismally low trade union density means that informal workers are all the more likely to be non-unionized and heavily exploited. By and large, informal workers like construction workers have not won

the same kind of attention of established trade union federations and a very chequered history exists of their attempts to unionize.¹⁹

Importantly, construction workers can be categorized into two kinds — one, who wait at labour chowks and find building works (these are relatively better off workers), and the second includes the migrant construction workers (who work in the building of roads and other public works, and are the most vulnerable). Migrant construction workers are in a particularly vulnerable position because they migrate from their state of origin, thereby losing their ability to access subsidized ration. Their ration cards are registered at their home town/tehsil and thus cannot be used in other states where they have migrated.

Gradually, when we take into account the environment at construction sites, and the paucity of facilities provided to the construction workers, it gives an accurate representation of how the labourers in the informal sector are generally treated. Dr. Sarkar pointed to two categories with regard to the nature of a construction site. The first is where only some construction occurs, such as small houses. At such construction sites the basic amenities, such as clean drinking water, clean toilets, etc. are not available for the construction workers. The second category includes the big construction projects, wherein the work process is relatively organized but the workers remain in an informal status. At such construction sites, some arrangements for the construction workers, such as toilets and drinking water are made available, but often these facilities also remain inadequate.

Comrade Alok enlisted the following legal violations that are constantly practiced in a construction site:

- (a) no creche facility at the site for women construction workers with children;
- (b) no anti-sexual harassment committee at the site;
- (c) the construction workers are not paid as per the minimum wage decided by the state government. For instance, in Delhi, the minimum wage is INR 596 per day, but the construction workers get less than INR 300;
- (d) The living conditions at the site are miserable, no good water supply and no sanitation;
- (e) No safety provisions such as head gear, belts, safety jackets;
- (f) Extreme workload and no justice for construction workers who die at the site.

¹⁹ It was Lokhande, Jyotibha Phule's disciple, who first organized construction workers – a fact shared by Comrade Alok.

He went on to discuss an example that encapsulated many of the aforementioned violations. In the build up to the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, several incidents of fatal accidents at construction sites, denial of proper accident compensation, illegal quantum of overtime, non-payment of wages, etc. were reported by workers. In this regard, Comrade Alok visited construction workers who were injured outside the JLN Stadium, New Delhi. Family members of these workers showed the job cards of their badly injured relatives, which revealed that the workers had been working non-stop for 22 hours before the accident. Lack of safety equipment at the site and the pithy amount of compensation announced were highlighted by Comrade Alok in this case.

With regard to legal provisions in the context of accidents at construction sites, various governmental policies and laws such as the Employees Compensation Act, 1923, have been formulated to provide compensation to the construction worker's family if the worker meets with an accident at the construction site. When fatal accidents occur, the welfare boards pay compensation to the family even if the construction worker is *not* registered. However, most construction workers are not made aware of such policies and compensation rights. Furthermore, the procedure to avail these compensatory benefits is very tedious, because of which family members of injured/expired construction workers do not approach the authorities. Thus, it is common to find that construction workers who have met with an accident at the construction site are denied proper compensation as per the law. They are just given a meagre amount and intimidated to remain silent about their plight.



(Image source : Indian Express, 2020)

The image used displays the hazardous environment in which construction workers work at construction sites. It also indicates that no safety equipment is provided to construction workers in India.



(Image source : XinhuaNet, April 28 2020)

Construction work resumed in Wuhan, Central China's Hubei province amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As can be seen from the image, construction workers are provided with adequate safety equipment, including helmets, gloves and masks at the construction site by the subcontracting company. Like India, China is also a developing country but working conditions of construction labour vary drastically.

Indeed, most of the times, subcontracting companies and even principal employers are never held accountable for not providing basic facilities at construction sites. In some cases where the supervisor or the contractor is handed over the money by the principal employer for timely disbursal of wages and for provision of basic amenities at the work site, corrupt contractors/supervisors end up keeping the money. Some even abscond with the workers' wages. Another prominent legal violation at construction sites is that as per the law, construction workers are supposed to get 4 days of holiday in a month, but these construction workers are usually denied any leaves, and their wages are routinely cut if they do not report to work or request for half-day. Even genuine reasons like leave for medical purposes is hardly entertained.

Clearly, before the lockdown the condition of the construction workers was pathetic, given the major loopholes in welfare policies for construction workers and their poor implementation in an era of growing deregulation of work relations by the Indian state. As articulately explained by Comrade Alok, the basic entitlements of India's construction workers (with regard to wage and social security) are the *lowest* in the world, and that even on ordinary days these workers are subjected to intense workload and long working hours with no proper wages.

(b) *Some life accounts of construction workers*

Students of St. Joseph's Boys' High School, Bengaluru, interviewed construction workers in the city as part of their Class 11 Economics project for the year 2019-2020. They worked with PARI Education to document the lives of men and women who have travelled from villages across India to find jobs as construction labourers, masons, tilers and more. Our study looked into their findings to draw out some affirmations of the realities drawn out by our trade unionist and labour administration contacts.

The detailed account of migrant construction workers, masons and other labourers associated with the construction industry indicated the tragic life of the average construction worker. In the following life accounts, the construction workers interviewed hailed originally from north Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. They reported coming to work in the building industry in Bengaluru when their primary occupation back in their villages, i.e., agriculture, was unable to support their families financially.

Hanumantha, 32 years-old, is from Hunsgi village, Shorapur taluka, Yadgir district, Karnataka, and he performs all sorts of construction work, ranging from lifting bricks, stones and cement to cleaning and arranging at a construction site in Banaswadi. His wife, Bhumamma, importantly works alongside him on the site for the same contractor; indicating family migration. Hanumantha works at the construction site from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. for six days a week, with Sunday being a weekly holiday. He earns INR 500 a day and his wife earns INR 350 a day. Hanumantha recounted the following: In the city, we need to work *every day* to fill our stomachs” (emphasis added). He also shared that he stays in a rented house in Bengaluru and pays INR 2,500 as monthly rent. In this house, there is no proper water or electricity supply so they have to borrow water from their neighbour. They spend around INR 1,500 on food a week and then have expenses of medical care, travel and repaying of debts. After all their expenses, there is hardly anything left to save for the future. He explained that they cannot afford to take any days off as this will mean forgoing our daily wage (PARI Education 2020).

Another life account is that of Prabhu Badigar and his wife Sundaramma, who are from Shivenoor in Yadgir district of Karnataka. They transport cement, stones, sand and bricks at the site. When asked about his daily work at the site, Prabhu explained: “I carry eight to nine bricks at a time up the stairs, almost 100-120 times a day; my wife does the same, carrying six

bricks at a time, around 30-35 times a day.” The couple shared that after a construction project finishes and before they get the next one, they do not earn anything. They also shared that they have no work [and no wages] when it rains. They are denied wages even when there is a holiday or when materials have not come in. Prabhu describes his experience of starting work as a construction worker when his uncle, a daily wage worker himself, brought him to Bengaluru. He stated the following:

When I first started working, I earned 25-30 rupees a day. Later I started earning 60 rupees a day, while my wife got around 40 rupees a day. This was about 20 years ago. These days, I make 500 rupees a day and my wife makes 350 rupees a day. We work from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day, with an hour set aside for lunch. On Sundays, we don't work... My monthly income can go up to 13,000 rupees and my wife can earn around 9,000 rupees. The cost of living in Bengaluru is very high and we barely save anything. We end up spending 8,000 rupees on our basic needs every month.

Another significant piece of information that Prabhu highlighted was that mostly construction workers are *not* paid on a monthly basis, i.e., unlike other jobs where the salary is paid usually on the first day of the month. Instead, construction workers are paid on a daily basis, so hence if they do not work a particular day, they do not receive the wages of that particular day. Connecting this to details shared by Comrade Alok, who explained that *partial* release of wages is a prominent practice, it is evident that contractors seek to keep construction labour tied down through wage arrangements which barely sustains the workers.

Sundaramma, Prabhu's wife and a construction worker herself, further shared her grievances in vivid terms:

There was no fear of going hungry at our village. But here [at the construction site in Bengaluru] we cannot miss even a day's work. If we do, we must go to sleep hungry. The cost of living is too high.

Sundaramma furthermore highlighted the filth of the construction sites and the slum where she and her family stay:

The dirty toilets in the slum where we live and at the construction site really bother me. The environment around us is not clean; we fall ill often and have to spend on medical expenses, which is an extra burden. We don't even have clean drinking water or electricity for our family. We worry about the lack of safety measures and first aid at the construction site. As a woman, I also have to worry about men who misbehave or deliberately make me uncomfortable at my workplace.

Thus, the vulnerability of women construction workers, and the concerns of hygiene and sanitation for construction workers in general at construction sites, are undeniable realities.

Such accounts of workers also indicate how poorly equipped the construction sites are when it comes to medical provisions and safety measures for the workers.

(c) Women construction workers

After agriculture and the domestic work industry, the construction industry is the next largest employer of women. Women's labour in construction is mostly concentrated in public and private works at suburban locations, building of apartments and metro lines in mainstream urban areas. Women workers at construction sites are largely migrants from small villages. Since the construction industry falls under the informal sector, the data and statistics are conservative estimates at best. The few available statistics tend to indicate less participation of women in the construction industry, but in actuality, a large number of women construction workers are employed at construction sites. Women construction workers are often not registered with the government, receive lower wages than men, and in most instances the contractors purposefully conceal the regular employ of women at construction sites so as to avoid making provisions for facilities like separate toilets and creches.



(Image source : Newsclick.in ; Urban News digest, 2018)

Women construction workers are often not provided with proper facilities and safety gear at a construction site. They work for example barefoot or in slippers.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (henceforth, POSH Act) was enacted as a comprehensive legislation to provide a safe, secure and enabling environment, free from sexual harassment to *every* working woman. Under the POSH Act, an employer is legally required to constitute an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC), which is a body envisaged to receive complaints on sexual harassment at the workplace from an aggrieved woman, to inquire into such complaints, and

to make recommendations to the employer on the action required pursuant to its inquiry. However, in the case of the informal sector, such ICCs rarely exist on the ground. Thus, women construction workers have no such body at their workplace to report matters of sexual harassment. In reality, sexual harassment is one of the most common problem faced by women construction workers. No official complaint against the culprit is lodged as the women workers are under a constant threat of losing their jobs if they complain. Often women construction workers face perpetual sexual assault and mental torture at the hands of the mason or the contractors at the construction sites, specifically because of the informal nature of recruitment and work relations, which in turn makes them overtly dependent on the 'good will' of the supervisor and contractor. Moreover, the lack of privacy at construction sites as well as in the temporary shanties built for workers to reside during the project, make women construction workers fall prey to a lot of sexual harassment.

Another long-standing challenge faced by women construction workers include the denial of equal remuneration. Apart from unequal remuneration, is the problem of who the wages are paid to. These women workers and their husbands are usually recruited together by contractors at the same construction sites, and quite often the wages of the women construction workers are given to their husbands directly. Women construction workers who are sole earners of their families and do not have their husbands working at the same construction site are in an even more vulnerable position. Such women are easy targets for the exploitative masons or contractors who either deny their wages or give them some small amount instead of giving their proper wage. For such masons and contractors, women workers are a source of cheap labour and can be intimidated easily, thus they target specifically women construction workers.

Furthermore, connecting the gender-based pay discrimination with the realities of unpaid domestic work, Comrade Alok aptly explained that women construction workers end up working harder due to the double burden of household chores and construction work. This double burden leads to intense workload and burnout. Essentially then, women construction workers face not only undervaluation of their paid labour and the routine violation of their privacy/personal space, but also end up having less time for themselves due to the increased burden of work. Additionally, with no facility of creches at the work site, these women have an added responsibility to take care of their young children in otherwise dangerous and unhygienic conditions. At times, they even carry their young children to the construction sites because their shanties are not safe enough, and so, they are compelled to take care of their

children and work at the same time. Often their young ones can be seen sleeping or playing in the hot sun just a few steps away from cement mixers, cranes, and other heavy machinery at construction sites. It is also not uncommon for heavily pregnant women construction workers to give birth and report back to work without adequate rest. Expectedly, both the education and health of the children of construction workers is deeply compromised.

During the lockdown of 2020, the exploitation of women construction workers deteriorated. Most significantly women construction workers specifically faced a crisis in motherhood wherein they were unable to feed their young children and give them any sense of security. Women construction workers were the first, to be abandoned by the contractors and the subcontracting companies. The plight of construction workers in general during the lockdown was miserable but women construction workers specifically faced immense psychological trauma because they were unable to feed their young children. They suffered a 'motherhood crisis' immensely. They were also denied their wages of the previous months, the current month and months when the lockdown was imposed, and they directly relied upon government relief schemes to access even basic ration. Women construction workers being unregistered and mostly migrants were unable to draw these relief aids and thus began walking towards their villages with their children on foot, with heavy bags carried on their head and a hefty baggage of grief and precarity in their hearts.

Post lockdown also, women construction workers remained unrecognised of the hard work they put in and the crisis they faced during the lockdown. If we talk about the trend of employment and wages with regard to women construction workers, women were more likely to be hired because they are an easy source of cheap labour. Thus, the scenario was of more workers and less wages after the lockdown. Workers were more eager to earn a living because of the crisis they faced during the lockdown, but again, contractors did not pay adequate wages to the construction workers who returned back. With regard to women construction workers, the trend was very low as most of the women migrant construction workers did not return back to the cities due to the struggle they had to face during the lockdown. There was also this fear of a lockdown being imposed again due to the pandemic situation and consequently many women construction workers did not return to the cities.

(d) The lockdown period and succeeding months

On March 24, 2020 the world's most stringent and hastily announced lockdown was imposed by the Indian government, rendering a lot of workers from the informal sector helpless. Following the March 24 announcement, the lockdown was extended from the initially-declared 21 days to the end of May 2020. Severe restrictions remained even post 31st May till the end of June 2020, although it was projected that lockdown was being imposed only on containment zones.

As hardship of trapped migrant labour surfaced, various voices began emerging from different parts of the country about how migrant construction workers were entrapped by subcontracting companies or supervisors at various locations. It was reported that these construction workers were not paid their wages and were also prevented from returning to their native villages. In most instances, the subcontracting companies or the supervisor provided them with food for a few initial days but then abandoned the workers as the lockdown stretched. For example, in a case reported from Karnataka, the construction workers were not allowed to leave for their villages. They were not even provided with food or their due wages too by the contractors. The instance of construction workers stranded in Dwarka (Delhi) has been described above, wherein construction workers were trapped by their company supervisors with no food and no wages, and their multiple efforts to reach to the authorities led to no relief.

The immediate repercussions of the lockdown on construction workers included the loss of employment and source of income. Expectedly, the pithy savings of construction workers were exhausted within a few days whilst the lockdown was extended. There was a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of migrant workers who compromised their safety in order to get home. With no income and access to proper relief, many were trapped in cities with their entire families. They were unable to afford food for themselves and their children, and those living on rent in shanties faced repeated harassment at the hands of landlords. Eventually, such conditions compelled scores of construction workers to leave for their villages. Since no transportation facility was easily available till agitations pushed the government to start 'shramik trains', many undertook the arduous journey on foot. Even when 'shramik trains', and bus transport were grudgingly provided by the state administration, they were too few in number and resulted in massive overcrowding. Neither were railway stations equipped with food and water services. Many migrant workers were thus forced to travel by foot.

We have no account of how many of these workers died while walking towards their villages either due to accidents or due to starvation. All we have are some news reports of individual incidents. One such incident unfolded between the area of the Jalna and Aurangabad where 16 migrant workers were crushed to death on the railway tracks while resting after walking for long. These migrant workers were walking towards their home state Madhya Pradesh and had a little amount of food and just INR 100-200 in their pockets. There were many instances like these.



(Image source : The Indian Express, 2020)

16 migrant workers who were resting at the railway tracks after attempting to walk for 45km on foot to catch a 'Shramik train' died as a goods train ran over them.

Further explaining the important reasons behind why construction workers decided to leave the cities that they had built, Dr. Sarkar emphasized that these workers were mostly inter-state migrant workers. Hence, they could not avail of any ration facilities or any other benefit from the cities. They had ration cards and appropriate documents but these were of their native villages. This anomaly revealed the administrative gap in assessing the vulnerable status and concrete needs of informal migrant workers. It also revealed the gap between the government's pronouncements and the actual work/procedure followed to distribute rations and cash transfer benefits through the Public Distribution system and the Common services centre, respectively. Although it was announced that migrant workers and informal sector workers in general would receive ration kits and direct cash transfers into their savings accounts for the specific months the lockdown, in actual practice only those workers who had ration cards valid in the cities or were registered under other welfare schemes were able to avail these ration kits and other relief aid.

Moreover, the relief package remained ineffective for such construction workers because of massive corruption. As explained by Comrade Alok Kumar, INR 37,000 crores which was collected as the Cess Fund was left unused. These funds were never disbursed for the welfare of the construction workers. Even with regard to the health-related facilities for construction workers and by and large migrant workers, all such facilities were unavailable. When we inquired about the same, Comrade Alok explained that the contractors threatened to cut money from salaries for providing masks, sanitizers and other equipment required to keep construction workers safe from the spread of virus. Further, public-funded hospitals were either closed or converted to 'COVID dedicated centres'; making access to timely healthcare difficult for the labouring poor, who are most depended on public-funded hospitals. The disease monitoring system was also disrupted with the sole focus on COVID-19. Consequently, people suffering from other serious fatal diseases, such as Tuberculosis, were left untreated. Impoverished construction workers were unable to afford the expenses of private hospitals, and thus many silently suffered deterioration in their existing medical ailments. Turning to the question of who should be held responsible for this precipitated crisis, our trade union contact, Comrade Alok, aptly pointed out that since the subcontracting company is the prime and legal employer of these construction workers, they should be held accountable for such violations and especially for what happened during the lockdown. He also added that if we take a broader view, the government and the society at large were equally responsible for the perpetual precarity engulfing construction workers.

Eventually, when we take into account the post lockdown trends and scenario, Dr. Sarkar noted that in some areas the wages shot up due to lack of sufficient labour. He also indicated that workers who returned to the cities were apparently provided pending wages of previous months. This is a point which requires further investigation. Another trend which Dr. Sarkar asserted, and is also confirmed by news reports, is that the shortage of construction labour propelled higher workloads on returning construction workers. The workload increased drastically as most of the work was halted during the lockdown and there was pressure to meet deadlines. Comrade Alok, of course, clarified that it is difficult to quantify intensifying workloads, given that on ordinary days most construction workers are subjected to intense workloads and long working hours. He further connected the precarity of construction labour in the post lockdown context to the wider shift in the labour law paradigm. The major change in this regard was the suspension of the existing labour laws from May 2020 onwards, and the introduction of the new Labour Codes. Various states such as Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh,

Rajasthan, Gujarat, Goa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Assam, Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh moved to amend the old labour laws in order to accelerate revival of the economic activities of big private businesses; thereby increasing the working hours from 8 hours to 12 hours.

While Uttar Pradesh²⁰ and Madhya Pradesh scrapped key labour laws for the next three years, Gujarat did the same for 1,200 days. In Uttar Pradesh, only three labour laws were made applicable in the state for the next three years apart from provisions related to children and women in the suspended laws. The three include the *Building and Other Construction Workers Act, 1996*, *Workmen Compensation Act, 1923*, and the *Bonded Labour Act, 1976*. Labour is a concurrent subject, with both states and the Centre having the power to enact laws. If there is any conflict between central and state laws, the central law is expected to prevail. In this regard, the new Labour Codes ushered in by the central government become very important. The central government in November 2020 introduced a Bill on the Labour Code on Industrial Relations (2019) in the Lok Sabha. The Industrial Relations Code is the third of the four labour codes that got Cabinet and Lok Sabha's nod. Objecting to many provisions in this and other Labour Codes, various trade unions and workers' organizations went on a protest and at least 10 central trade unions filed official complaints. The International Labour Organisation, meanwhile, appealed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi with regard to the proposed labour law amendments by the states, following the complaints made by these trade unions.

Conclusion

Provisions of the new Industrial Relations Code continue to be enforced, despite the Union Labour Ministry's claims of postponement of implementation. Before the lockdown in 2020, eight hours was the maximum time limit for a workday. Beyond eight hours, forcing the labour force to work was illegal. While construction workers and several other informal sector workers have usually put in more than eight hours a day, we are now witnessing a legal paradigm being cemented post lockdown whereby even on paper the law of eight hours is being completely revised. A more systemic assertion of a 12 hours workday is evident in these difficult times when majority of the labouring poor have been forced complete economic ruination. For construction labour this marks an inhumane and harsh policy shift, given the intense physical work performed in their occupation. Of course, the relative ease with which

²⁰ The Uttar Pradesh government had to withdraw this order of the 12-hour shift for workers, following a notice from the Allahabad High Court.

such drastic changes are being brought about in the country's labour laws also indicates just how exploited and oppressed construction workers and other informal sector workers have been even before the lockdown.



Lockdowns and Online Learning: Educational Inequalities Magnified

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Overview

Amidst the scare of the possible rapid spread of the novel Coronavirus, the haphazard imposition of a strict nationwide lockdown in India in 2020 brought the lives of millions to a standstill. Barring the essential services, all other economic activities were curtailed, which inevitably challenged people's survival; particularly in the case of the underprivileged sections of society. By and large, within each economic strata or class, women when compared to men were placed in a more vulnerable situation. One indices of intensifying gender disparity was a growth in the average quantum of unpaid work performed by women. According to data compiled by UN Women, women from all over the world were relatively engaged in more (unpaid) domestic work than their male counterparts. As per this report, in India the average hour spent per week by women on childcare during COVID-19 has been 33.2 while men spent 28.2 hours.

The skewed impact of the pandemic-triggered lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 on women was also noticeable in the education sector. For a country like India where female education has been lagging behind other developing countries, lockdowns have reportedly created more barriers to the spread of female education. While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the regular direct teaching educational process due to the closure of schools and universities, the serious repercussions of this disruption and the corresponding shift to online learning became starkly evident against the backdrop of *existing* educational inequalities along class, caste, gender, linguistic, and regional lines.

Moreover, almost immediately after the imposition of the lockdown in 2020, hectic efforts to continue with the 2019-20 academic session and examinations in abnormal circumstances emerged across many big public universities. An "absurd" race towards 'normality' was pursued (Pathak 2020), in which vulnerable sections of youth with little

resources to pursue online education, fell far behind. The entire process triggered much-needed debate on the country's education system.

A digital divide in accessing online education was evident, given that rural India lags behind urban households in terms of access to internet and digital technology (Modi & Postaria 2020; Sharma 2020). Having said this, as recorded in a survey on household social consumption related to education, which was part of the NSO's 75th round conducted from July 2017 to June 2018, even within urban households there is a marked digital divide along socio-economic status, and on an average only 42 per cent households in cities are internet-enabled (The Hindu 2020). There are eleven States with less than 20 per cent internet penetration, which includes States with software hubs such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (The Hindu 2020). Consequently, prevailing inequalities and discrimination intensified with the shift to online learning.

The rampant inequalities in terms of class, caste, community, region, gender and physical disabilities have limited the underprivileged sections such as rural poor and urban poor, and among these strata, women, from being enabled to access online education altogether. Note for instance the following observations reported by *The Statesman*:

According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India report, on the national level, fewer women (33 per cent) have access to internet compared to men (67 per cent), with rural areas experiencing more disparities (28-72) compared to urban areas (38-62). The current situation has also laid bare the language divide prevalent across India with vernacular medium schools largely (though with exceptions) catering to the poor whilst English medium schools cater to other sections of the society. Here again comes the aspect of the digital divide: poorest students do not have access to smartphones, and even if they do, net connectivity is poor, and content is often not available in vernacular languages. This gives rise to discrimination in access to education. Mobile phones are the most popular medium of accessing internet in both urban and rural areas as per the report...there is a lack of digital infrastructure for both the teachers and students and a disparity in internet connection and access to devices; while all students might have smartphones, not all of them own desktops or laptops which are more suited for educational purposes (Misra and Mishra 2020).

Interestingly, with the easing of lockdown restrictions post 30 June 2020, online teaching-learning persisted and new policy frameworks and roadmaps were strategically introduced, such as the New Education Policy 2020, wherein online learning has been showcased as a 'successful' solution to the country's deficit in quality education and equal access to formal, regular education. In the most recent lockdown imposed in the months of April and May 2021, we have again seen online learning taking the centre-stage with the model

of ‘Blended Learning’ being proposed by the University Grants Commission (UGC). As per such proposals, the new ‘normal’ entails up to 40 per cent of syllabi to be offered online. This is of course in addition to online courses offered on the SWAYAM portal, and which students may also opt for. Making its intentions well known, the UGC has also publicly released an approved list of 38 universities in the country which can offer full-fledged online degree courses *without* its prior approval (Snigdha 2021). There is clearly a discernible push towards the mainstreaming of online education without resorting to widest possible consultation with stakeholders (Newslick 2021).

Despite such policy developments, a significant corpus of literature has highlighted the adverse repercussions of the online mode of teaching and examination on students as well as on teachers. In the initial months of the lockdown in 2020 itself, it has been forcefully argued that while teachers frantically distributed study material through online platforms in an attempt to complete their syllabi, there emerged little proof of just how much the students grasped from the online education (John 2020a). Following the release of guidelines by the Professor R.C. Kuhad-chaired committee, constituted by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in the midst of the lockdown, large central universities like Delhi University (DU) proceeded to steamroll through the Open Book Examination (OBE) mode in the *online* mode. In unprecedented times, evaluating and assessing students through external examinations conducted online appeared as an insensitive bureaucratic imposition, and one which overlooked how large sections of poorer students were struggling to cope with the shift to the online mode (Kaul 2020). Significantly, the same UGC guidelines also emphasized that as part of new norms, educational institutions were to ‘adapt’ and make provisions for up to 25 per cent of their syllabi to be taught online. In other words, the lockdown in 2020 became an initiating point in the current dispensation’s attempt to push online learning as a significant mode of imparting education in the future (John 2020a).

In an article tracing the build-up to mainstreaming of online learning and the perils of such education in India, John (2020b) aptly highlights that even *prior* to the lockdown in 2020, the promotion of online education has been constantly projected in policy discourse as a viable solution; by and large by conveniently brushing aside the realities of technological challenges, unequal access to digital technology, as well as lack of conducive learning environments at home for a large section of youth in the country. Many students have grappled with poor internet connections, low average download speed, and a large number have tried to sustain

online learning through mobile phones; thereby leading to less receptivity. With complaints of accessibility being reported by students of crème-de-la crème higher institutions in the national capital,²¹ the plight of those in lower ranking institutions and in the periphery of college education can only be imagined. More importantly, it has been argued that online education has been touted as the ‘great equalizer’ in order to further facilitate the state’s reduced per capita allocation of funds towards education (John 2020b).

Scenes from the margins: inequalities bred by distance learning and informal education

It has been noted in official data and news reports that informal education in the form of open and distance learning (ODL) has been growing steadily with the rapid increase in the school and college-going population of the country. In particular, the enrollment of students from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes has been phenomenally increasing in the distance learning mode (Gohain 2019). However, as argued by John (2020b), the portrayal of ODL as an easy and affordable method to impart education in the remote areas and to the marginalized is a problematic one, as the picture on ground level is totally different.

Majority of the students from the ranks of the urban and rural poor are enrolled in the ODL mode run by state and central universities. These ODL institutes receive very little or literally zero state funding. This further interferes with the quality of education being imparted to the poorest and most needy students because they are deprived of direct learning involving trained teachers and have to manage with poor quality study material. For instance, the Delhi University’s School of Open Learning (SOL), which largely enrolls students from weaker socio-economic backgrounds, has not received any funds from the government since 1997 (John 2020b). Students enrolled in various undergraduate and postgraduate courses in SOL also complain of the acute shortage of personal contact sessions, proper study material, timely dissemination of information on personal contact sessions, inadequate library facilities, lack of co-curricular activities, among several other problems (The Indian Express 2019; Saroha 2019; John 2020b). Thus, an understanding can be derived of the discrepancies and discrimination

²¹ In September 2020, the Students Union of one of the top-ranking institutions, Lady Sri Ram College (University of Delhi), conducted a survey which highlighted a digital divide in online learning. Of the 1400 respondents, 27.5% of respondents had said they didn’t have access to a laptop and 39.4% had said they didn’t have a good internet connection. One of these respondents, Aishwarya Reddy, committed suicide in November 2020 due to the inability to purchase a laptop to support her online learning. She was the child of daily wage labourers based in Telangana. Aishwarya had been desperately waiting for her INSPIRE scholarship money to come through.

inherent within the system of informal modes of education like distance learning, which are precursors of online learning.

Importantly, like the ODL mode, the mainstreaming of online learning also harbors the potential to further hamper the quality of education being imparted and the equal access to quality education. This is because as an informal education format, it too is essentially designed to cater to the under-privileged whose educational needs the state has consistently not been spending on adequately (John 2020b). An immediate illustration of the poor quality of education imparted in the online mode during the pandemic period to lakhs of students enrolled in ODL institutes is DU-SOL. The plight of these students on whom Open Book Examinations were thrust was reported in the news (Mishra 2020), and they have also been interviewed as part of this project.

Unfortunately, with the focus on “multiple paths of learning”, the New Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) that was approved by the Indian Cabinet has simply reinforced the assumption that online learning is learner-centric and equivalent if not better than formal classroom teaching. Mohd. Bilal (2020) in an insightful article that primarily focuses on the implications of adoption of NEP 2020 by the central government, locates this policy within the wider exclusionary nature of education in India since colonial into postcolonial times. He takes up the issue, for example, of the promulgation in NEP 2020 of “Early Childhood Education”, which for all its grandiose projections of extending educational facilities to young children, is not going to be attained or based on the actual appointment of more trained elementary-level teachers. Rather, the provisions on early childhood education speak of short-term online training of anganwadi workers for such teaching responsibilities; a measure akin to existing privatization efforts that are run on the labour of ill-trained, poorly-equipped para teachers (Bilal 2020). Instead of expanding the public-funded formal education institutions, successive regimes have focused on imparting education through the ODL mode. This apart, the NEP 2020 also aims to encourage public-private partnership model in a major way. The author, thus, drives attention to the serious implications of this education policy, i.e., keeping the majority of student population, especially the disadvantaged, away from acquiring public-funded *formal* education.

Likewise, Jyoti Raina (2020) importantly analyses the major shifts in India’s education policy since the post-independence era, which she argues, has led to “a highly differentiated schooling system.” While the country’s education policy during the first phase was underlined

by the constitutional vision of egalitarianism, the NEP 2020 has derailed from this vision with the introduction of non-formal education. The third phase, beginning from 2016, is marked by an underlining ideology that emphasizes on the notions of quality, efficiency and accountability whilst brushing away the fundamental aims of education (Raina 2020). With regard to the NEP 2020, Raina has raised an extremely crucial point as she questions whether this transformation will lead to the fulfilment of the constitutional vision of an equitable schooling system. The policy, according to the author, will only lead to the strengthening of the multi-layered hierarchical setup as the *social* notion of education for all falls into oblivion.

Geetha B. Nambissan (2020) also offers critical insights into the growing trend of the “low-cost” private education market for the poor, which claims to provide the poorest children with quality education while also ensuring the generation of desired profits. The argument is based on James Tooley’s study in which he identifies the ‘unrecognized’ private schools (later renamed as ‘low-fee private schools’) delivering better results than the government schools, and attempts to encourage these institutions with an “aim” to benefit the poor. Involving a number of global institutions, corporate houses and organizations, however, this “approach” seems to be mainly driven by profit-making (Nambissan 2020). Besides, the public-private partnership model has allowed the private sector institutions to make their way into the government-funded schools in order to provide “quality education”. Lastly, the author rightly points out that technology and digitization of education has been consistently pursued by the global institutions, states and corporates even before the pandemic, and that the lockdown has only accelerated their attempts to highlight the supposed “necessity” of technology-driven education, which private interests stand to most to benefit from.

Women’s education and the pandemic

With respect to women’s education, the pandemic and lockdowns have proved to be highly disruptive. One cannot overlook the several factors which, directly or indirectly, have been impacting women students’ access to education. Due to the lockdown in 2020, many middling and poorer households lost their sources of livelihood, and were plunged into a lot of economic pressures. Under such circumstances, the education of the girl child suffered as many could not afford technological devices and huge internet packages to pursue regular online classes. The tragic suicide of an economically vulnerable student of the premier Lady Sri Ram College (Delhi University) that was triggered by her delayed scholarship and her family’s inability to buy her a laptop (The New Indian Express 2020), amply highlights the grim economic

conditions curtailing the educational aspirations of women, as well as the brute reality of unpreparedness when it comes to implementation and mainstreaming of online learning.

Moreover, in the pandemic times and resulting economic ruination, families where there are two or more children, preference is given to the education of male child. In this regard, the gendered division over domestic work intensified, leading to women and girls being overburdened with higher amounts of unpaid work along with juggling online classes. An article published by Feminism in India (2020), in fact, points out that the lockdown forced many underprivileged families to marry off their daughters at an early age, who may never be able to return to school, and will now be exposed to the threat of sexual exploitation and early pregnancy. Therefore, the lockdown furthered patriarchal oppression of the average woman / girl child. This apart, depending on whether women belonged to oppressed and discriminated caste groups, their efforts to sustain their education during the pandemic-cum-lockdown period have also triggered backlash from dominant castes in the rural interiors of the country – a fact pointed out by our respondents.²²

Fieldwork and data collection

In order to corroborate many of the critical insights available in secondary literature on educational experiences during the pandemic-cum-lockdown, we focused on interviewing stakeholders who have been grappling with educational inequalities and discrimination. Consequently, it has been our endeavour to document the past one year's experiences of students in the ODL mode, students and teachers in regional universities, and students of socially marginalized and economically vulnerable communities in rural contexts. Given this spectrum of our sample, it is the concerns and voices of those most adversely affected by the bureaucratic imposition of online learning that has been captured in our fieldwork. Sadly, our fieldwork was cut short not only by the second surge of the pandemic, but also by the ill-health and eventual demise of our project team member, Soumya Jha. It had been her endeavour to contrast the *differential* experiences in the education sector by bringing in perspectives from students in the regular (formal) mode of university and school education as well. However, this elaboration had to be curtailed, given unfortunate circumstances.

Our sample, thus, came to include the following: (i) a teacher in a women's college in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) that catered to a significant population of semi-urban and rural women

²² Interview with Ms. Jyoti, a Dalit student activist, Dharodi Village, Jind, Haryana, 1st April 2021.

students; (ii) women students and activists of DU-SOL and DU's Non-collegiate Women's Education Board (NCWEB); and (iii) a Dalit woman student and activist located in Jind, Haryana. We used the semi-structured interview method in the case of the university teacher and Dalit woman student. In the case of the DU-SOL and NCWEB students, we opted for the group interview method, which was conducted online as per the respondents' convenience.

Recording the perspective of a college professor was essential, for teaching faculty could relay actual first-hand experience of preparing for and conducting online classes in unprecedented times like these. Critical topics like the quality of education, access to resources, personal experiences of coping with online teaching as a teacher, as well as the experience of students who happen to be from different socio-economic backgrounds, were sought to be addressed in our interactions with Dr. Shalini. Being an Assistant Professor at a women's college in U.P. also helped us factor in the differences in region, extent of internet and digital technology's reach, quality of study material to support online learning, nature of the college administration, and extent of lockdown restrictions.

Apart from a college professor, it was also necessary to document the experiences of women students, who primarily hailed from economically vulnerable and socially marginalized groups and personally bore the brunt of the digital divide that was sharpened with online learning. Finally, a woman Dalit student and activist, who has faced and organizes against mistreatment and discrimination on a daily basis, was crucial for our research in order to unpack the interplay of caste and gender when it came to experiences of disrupted education. In other words, through this interaction, we strived to collect and document how Dalit women students faced particular difficulties with their education during the pandemic.

Fieldwork analysis

The experience of the respondents was somewhat differential as they are all either working or studying in different regions, fields and belong to different demographic spaces but what was strikingly similar was the fact that the lockdown brought about the consolidation of pre-existing inequalities in education and additionally induced new threats such as the digital divide in their fight against exclusion and vulnerability.

(a) *An assistant professor at a women's college in U.P.*

In the interaction with Dr. Shalini, currently employed at a women's college in U.P., she was able to cover and discuss not only her own experience with the lockdown and online teaching, but also the experiences of female students who faced everyday challenges of attending online class with limited means. It was gender biasness and economic vulnerability that together contributed to this lack of means.

Our respondent mentioned how her students are from different socio-economic backgrounds, and that many of the women students belong to minority communities, and reside in villages. Due to their financial status, not all families can afford a smartphone for them. In the cases where a smartphone was available in the household, it was to be shared amongst the children of the house. Nonetheless, its control remained primarily with the male child. Additionally, young girls in villages are usually married off at a very young age. Even in such a case, they are reliant on their husbands for access to a smartphone.

On the question of the priority given to education, Dr. Shalini noted that within the rural, semi-urban population to which the college catered, women's education has never been given due importance, and this was irrespective of the lockdown, or what women themselves aspired for. Often, prior to the lockdown, many women students only attended the college when necessary. It was, however, noticed that with the transition to online teaching, some of her women students expressed relief as various problems, such as being disallowed to physically attend classes due to housework or familial concerns about the time and money spent on travelling, were no longer a factor to deny them regular access to classes. However, out of those who severely lacked access to facilities such as technical equipment to support online classes, many struggled to make arrangements like borrowing phones from their neighbours in order to attend classes. Notably, a significant number of students continued to have *no* access to classes, and those who did only had access to study material for a limited time during a day due to phone sharing and mobile data restrictions.

With their movement restricted and having to constantly stay at home, many of Dr. Shalini's students were forced to help other female members with housework, and hence, could not keep up with their home assignments, which pushed many into requesting for extra time for submissions. Dr. Shalini used her limited resources, and sometimes used strategies like making a chain of group calls / conference calls so as to reach more students. This situation

had a positive outcome, as she witnessed a boost in the confidence of her students, particularly those who came from rural areas and rarely spoke up in offline classes. However, continuous use of such techniques cannot be considered sustainable, for learning environments at home, the lack of socialization which real classrooms offer, and the long usage of mobile phones pose serious obstacles.

In this regard, as asserted by our respondent as well, though online learning cannot be negated in this era, it can never become a substitute altogether to the offline teaching mode as it seriously limits social interaction, elides differential learning capacities, and hampers all-round development based on regular interactions between different learners and between learners and the teacher. Moreover, many do not have *equitable* access to online learning, particularly women of less privileged backgrounds. Therefore, online learning tends to induce further inequalities in terms of class, caste, community, region and gender to play themselves out. This reality stands in contrast to the absurd policies of policy makers who wish to mainstream online learning by dismantling formal, direct classroom teaching-learning.

(b) Women students and activists of DU-SOL and DU's NCWEB

Through a group interview/interaction, we were able to get in touch with a few students of DU-SOL and DU's Non-collegiate Women's Education Board (NCWEB), some of whom were also student activists. They emphasized their experience with online education, with a major focus on mismanagement by the authorities, the pervasive digital divide along with concrete gender disparities.

With regard to the quality of education during the pandemic, the students reported that it was adversely impacted because online education was an entirely alien concept for almost all SOL students, and it took a while for them to be familiar with it. More importantly, the students pointed out that since the quality of education imparted in the distance learning mode has not been up to the mark even in the offline mode / in normal times, online learning turned out to be façade altogether. They explained that generally speaking, SOL students are expected to complete a yearlong course in just 13-14 classes, i.e., personal contact sessions, of which many a times not all the enrolled students are sent intimation messages by DU-SOL. Additionally, students in the ODL mode have to compete with those enrolled in the regular mode in excellent educational institutions, and that to on the basis of outdated, poor quality study material. Here it is to be noted that the study material provided by DU-SOL dates back

to the unrevised annual mode syllabi rather than to the semester mode Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) syllabi. This is despite the fact that in 2019, the DU administration sought to steamroll through the CBCS semester mode in SOL without any proper preparation and consultation with stakeholders like the students (Joshi 2019).

The SOL students also shared that they were not able to attend the few online classes during pandemic times due to the severe problems like financial instability that the COVID-19 crisis thrust upon their families. Many could not afford smartphones. In fact, those belonging to very vulnerable economic backgrounds could not prioritize online classes at all because they had to focus on feeding their families. At the time, some students whose parents were migrant labourers in Delhi were also part of the vast populations of labouring poor who left the city to walk back to their villages. Consequently, education, and that too for girls, was hardly a priority.

Besides these livelihood and survival issues, majority of ODL mode students faced a number of other challenges as well. The guidelines for online learning-teaching, for example, were not communicated clearly. The unavailability of study material was another issue, and in fact, some of the students received the study material just one day prior to their open book examinations. There were also those who did not even receive any material. The authorities conveniently resorted to excuses of the lockdown and then the numerous ‘unlock restrictions’ to evade sending hard copy material by post to ODL mode students. Many students who inquired were simply instructed to navigate to the e-Pustakdwar website, which often crashed, and which forced students to spend extra money on printouts despite the fact that they have paid for their hard copy material in their full tuition fee.²³

The respondents further pointed out that SOL teachers would take evening online classes, which a significant number of students could not attend, especially female students since they were occupied with household work at the time. Many also struggled with the technicalities of navigating digital and internet technology. Further, the online examination in the open book format in August 2020 for the terminal year students was particularly challenging. The guidelines/instructions released by DU on open book examinations could only be understood by those students who were well-versed with the technicalities surrounding the online mode. Moreover, there has always been a major component of students in SOL and

²³ As clarified in a subsequent interview with student activist, Bhim Kumar, on 5th April 2021.

NCWEB, who do not understand English properly, but sadly despite this well-known fact, the guidelines were largely circulated in English. Questions on how to download the question paper and upload the answer sheet remained mostly unanswered. Additionally, the SOL-notified site for uploading answer scripts did not always function properly. The fallout of the overall mismanagement was eventually reflected in the results of the online examinations wherein a lot of students flunked. Indeed, when the results were announced, our respondents noted that the students were at a loss. Not only were the results announced extremely late, they were also filled with errors. While many students flunked in the OBE format, for many students the status of the result was ambiguously published as “awaited”.

Hardly any relief was given to the SOL students by the DU authorities even during these troubling times. For the SOL students of second and first year, adequate time was not given to complete assignments being collected in lieu of an external examination. The students had to protest and submit memorandums that sought an increase in the stipulated deadline assignment submission. Additionally, since the closure of the University in 2020, they have had to constantly fight for their access to study material, classes, feasible time frames for the submission of assignments, the timely declaration of their results, and more importantly, the declarations of ‘correct’ results.

Given such bitter experiences, our respondents were expectedly very against the substituting of classroom learning with online education, and argued that the latter is *not* inclusive at all. The number of online classes conducted for ODL students has been limited, given the pre-existing practice of offering very limited personal-contact sessions, and so, such discriminatory practices are expected to persist in the online mode as well. Moreover, our respondents emphasized that it is *not* easy to clarify doubts online due to connectivity issues, constant noise in the background, and the enhanced lack of accountability of teachers in this mode.²⁴ Additionally, there are a lot of students who live in a single room house with a minimum of four to five other family members. In congested environments like these, it is nearly impossible to concentrate on online lectures and to prioritize online examinations.

Coming to the issue of gender disparities, the students talked about how many female students did not appear for the OBE in 2020 due to the non-availability of smartphones/laptops, or due to the preference given to their male sibling’s educational needs in these unprecedented

²⁴ As further clarified in a subsequent interview with student activist, Arti K., on 5th April 2021.

times. A student even shared that in her own household, her sister was expected to study from her 'book' while the parents decided to provide her brother with a phone to study to keep him connected with online classes. Our female respondents also shared that while attending online classes, female students could not ignore the constant call for help when it came to household work. In some cases, the family even asked the female students to give their attendance and then focus on the household chores.

The students also discussed at length the salient differences between the quality of education provided to regular college students of DU and those of SOL and NCWEB. Without a doubt, the overall educational environment in the regular mode and in ODL mode is completely different, and so are socio-economic backgrounds of majority of the enrolled students. For one, the students who are studying from regular colleges are generally from a stronger financial background and have availed of better schooling. In contrast, the bulk of ODL mode students in DU come from economically vulnerable backgrounds, socially marginalized groups, are first generation learners, and are products of government schooling. Secondly, while in regular colleges, a class generally comprises of 60 to 70 students, there are 300-350 students in a single class when it comes to the personal contact sessions organized for SOL students. In DU's NCWEB although a higher number of classes are provided to the students and the numbers are not as large as DU-SOL, both SOL and NCWEB students argued that hardly any extra and co-curricular activities are organized for them. This is again in marked contrast to DU's regular colleges, which conduct a lot of such activities in order to enhance the students' holistic self-development. All in all, the respondents highlighted that there is no all-round development in SOL since basic necessities are not provided. The study materials are obsolete and extremely erroneous. Gross factual and grammatical errors in their study material are common (John 2020c). Significantly, according to our respondents, all these inequalities and discriminations only became worse with the shift towards online education.

Moreover, declaration of the examination results of the regular mode is always given a priority by the DU authorities, whereas results are regularly delayed for months together in the case of SOL and NCWEB students. The fallout of this is their inability to reach the master's level due to awaited examination results. One of the students shared her personal experience of how she had applied for a master's degree and had even cleared the entrance exam for it. However, she could not join the 2020-21 session due to her undergraduate result being delayed by DU. Therefore, she will unfortunately have to appear for the entrance exam of the master's

course all over again for no fault of her own. Meanwhile, the students from DU's regular colleges successfully started with their master's degree as their undergraduate results were declared first and without any errors. Such accounts clearly show how rampant inequalities in existing education eat into upward mobility of the weakest and most needy students, many of whom are women. Their chances of higher studies, as well as their entry into the labour market with higher skills and qualifications are consistently thwarted by a skewed education system, which online learning tendentially reinforce.

(c) A Dalit woman student and activist located in Jind, Haryana

Our final respondent was Ms. Jyoti, a Dalit student and activist based in Dharaudi village, Jind district, Haryana, who voiced the many difficulties which engulfed school and college-going female Dalit students during the past year.

In villages, there are little to no provisions for basic necessities such as clean drinking water or washrooms, especially in impoverished Dalit households. Hence, access to technical equipment to attend online classes was a major luxury. The few households that had devices like laptops or smartphones did not grant the women in the family any access to them. Ms. Jyoti also explained how the financial strain brought about by the lockdown forced parents to choose between either feeding their families or educating their children. Additionally, many girls are first generation learners in her village, and therefore, were easily discouraged by their parents from continuing their studies during the pandemic. A lot of young school and college-going girls were expected to take on the burden of increased care work, involving the needs of their male elders. Whereas the offline mode of education allowed the girls to leave their homes for school/college/industrial training institute on a regular basis, the lockdown and post-lockdown restrictions only increased their struggle to cope with (online) education alongside housework and greater family/community surveillance.

The government and local bodies proved to be of no help as there were no attempts made to ensure that those in villages, especially those belonging to the poorer and marginalized sections, gained suitable access to the online mode of education. Our respondent narrated an incident wherein attempts made by progressive-minded villagers to set up exclusive village libraries for women so that they could focus on their studies and have access to study material during the lockdown, were ceremoniously shot down. The reasonings given was that there was no need for a library for women students since it has always been assumed to be a facility

available for just men. These and many other instances indicate just how much Dalit women students, in particular, bore the brunt of discriminatory practices and disruptions in education since the pandemic and lockdown.

Significantly, lack of access to education was not the only problem that Dalit students en masse faced. Our respondent shared that there also emerged a rise in their subhuman treatment. Ms. Jyoti explained that while lockdown restricted physical movement between villages, movement within a single village remained unchecked. Therefore, during the initial months of lockdown and before the initiation of online schooling, Dalit students were sent to fetch cow dung or other materials to use in fields or around the house. As soon as the villagers of dominant caste groups became aware of the movement of the Dalit students, they treated them routinely with disrespect.

Conclusion

Through our aforementioned interactions, we were able to capture some of the concerns of those who were most affected by the disruption of formal education and the resulting imposition of online learning. Online education impacted teachers and students differently. Moreover, among students too, there was a difference in impact and distress, owing to the fact that our student respondents studied in different kinds of universities, and belonged to different strata of society.

What stood out clearly was that online learning created further exclusion of a major section of the population, in a country which is already riddled with inequalities of all kinds. It is evident from these interactions that the mainstreaming online education is not something that the state should be fast-tracking. Indeed, the promotion of online learning in times like these appears more of a ploy by the authorities to continue to ignore the increased stress/dislocation faced by marginalized sections and the corresponding need to enhance state expenditure in education. Though circumstances dictate that we must continue with online education for the time being, it should not wind up being a permanent substitute for direct teaching-learning, especially now when the infrastructure for it is not fully developed and the component of first-generation learners is growing.

Online education, much like other prevalent systems in the country, is not even close to being inclusive. Problems like it being unaffordable for a significant majority; the lack of quality study material; discrimination along the lines of caste, class and gender; the sheer lack

of an adequate number of quality public-funded schools and universities; the overall denial of opportunities for the economically vulnerable and socially marginalized; etc. will continue to persist until the state rapidly enhances its expenditure in education.



In Lieu of a Conclusion

Gayatri Ahuja, III year Political Science Honours

Women informal workers form a major chunk of the economy, with an estimated 740 million out of the two billion informal workers across the world being women (ILO 2018). In Asia, for every 70.5 shares of non-farm employment belonging to men, women equate to 60.4. Correspondingly, we find that women's labour is clearly an important component in the largest industries of the Indian economy. Further, our study also concludes that the bulk of women's labour is concentrated in the constantly expanding and largely unorganized *informal* sector of the economy, which has been the case for some time now. It could thus be assumed that the bare minimum benefits and economic security would have gradually reached women workers. However, in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns, our study indicates something quite different. Our study concludes that while gender disparities have widened as a result of impact of post-lockdown economic and family dynamics, efforts by the state to address this remains weak or non-existent.

Women informal workers were the first to lose jobs in March 2020, and the last to gain their livelihoods back during the period post the lockdown. The garment industry, as shown in our study, constitutes as a high volume, low-cost production base, marked by abysmal working conditions and meagre pay. Surveys of workers in this industry shows the heavy exploitation, recent employment and unemployment trends in the backdrop of the pandemic and lockdown of 2020. The deplorable conditions of employment leaves women vulnerable to regular overtime and burnout.

The intense plight of domestic workers and widespread ill treatment by upper class employers is evident in the analysis provided by our study, which only worsened with the setting in of the pandemic and enforcement of lockdowns. In this industry the paucity of governmental intervention is amply evident, and this in fact has encouraged some important efforts at unionization.

The construction industry exemplifies the huge economic divide as well as the ruination witnessed by informal workers this past year. Further, our fieldwork adequately captures the specific disadvantages and precarity faced by women who work at construction sites.

Exploitation of paid labour and the sexual division of labour leaves these women at the mercy of employers and their husbands. The massive loss of livelihoods and worsening of conditions of work life of women workers have not been adequately documented by state agencies, especially given the pre-existing tendency to leave undocumented the bulk of India's informal, migrant labour. Even professional working women like nurses also reported that exploitation has amplified during the lockdown and immediate post-lockdown months.

While women workers face loss of income and work, they also were confronted with increased unpaid labour at home. Increasing burden of unemployment and cost of meeting the subsistence needs of the family fell on women in households. This is evident from the high levels of debt reported by women workers in our sample. Clearly, women workers also lack access to basic facilities like healthcare, transport, and safeguard mechanisms against sexual and domestic violence.

The increased plight and distress of women workers in many industries this past year has also been facilitated by poorly envisaged and implemented relief packages, skewed gender budgeting, and the weakening of existing labour laws. According to our study, the brunt of skewed policies, poor governance and changes in labour laws tangentially impact the everyday lives of the lower segments of the workforce more intensively, where most working women are concentrated.

Our research on the education sector provides evidence to support claims that the online mode of teaching-learning caters to the privileged sections in the Indian society, while facilitating the continued exclusion of more vulnerable and socially marginalized groups of students, many of whom are first-generation women learners. Based on our case study of DU's distance learning mode during the past year, we can safely say that online education is one of the least inclusive mediums of education, and is dangerously anchored on reduced state expenditure on public-funded education.

Overall, this research shows the added burdens on women during the lockdown, the increase in gender inequality and economic backwardness with the setting in of the pandemic. The inadequate nature of government measures in the period post the lockdown, and the constant struggle of women, especially from the marginalized communities, form the foundation of this study's attempt to trace the distress and enhanced precarity during the lockdown.

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Appendix – 1

Questions posed to frontline health workers during telephonic interviews conducted on the 28th and the 29th of March 2021:

Q1. Please share your name and occupation.

Q2. Will you please share which hospital you work in? Is it a government/private hospital?

Q.3 What were some of your initial thoughts when the lockdown was first put into place in March 2020?

Q4. What were some of your experiences in the first month of lockdown?

Q5. Have you been assigned COVID-19 duty?

Q6. What were some of the major changes that occurred within your work sphere and work routine?

Q7. Did you feel adequate arrangements were made for your safety while assigning you COVID-19 duty?

Q8. Were there some changes that occurred within your household during the period of complete lockdown from 25 March to May 2020?

Q9. Did you find yourself juggling an increased amount of household chores and your regular paid work? How did you cope up with that?

Q10. How did you negotiate / manage the concerns of your family regarding you being a frontline health worker?

Q11. In private hospitals, have nurses lost employment because they resisted low pay for COVID-19 duty and continuous duty?

Q12. How responsive were the government authorities to the concerns and needs of nurses during the lockdown period?

Appendix – 2

Questions posed to Mrs. Gracey- the self-employed woman vendor during a telephonic interview on 1st April 2021. Due to there being a language barrier, the questions were posed on our behalf, in Manipuri, by Ms. Lembi, daughter of Mrs. Gracey.

Q1. Please share your name and exact occupation.

Q2. How badly has your work been affected by the pandemic-cum-lockdown, and has there been a recovery under the period of unlock restrictions?

Q3. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced with respect to work and your earnings during the weeks of lockdown? How much have things changed since May/June 2020 when lockdown began to be lifted?

Q4. Did you have savings to help you over the period of lockdown? When did the situation go from bad to worse for you if we speak in financial terms?

Q5. Did you have to avail of loans? Are you paying off debts?

Q6. During the past year of difficulties, have tensions grown within the household?

Q7. In your opinion, do you think the government has, in any way, provided some sort of relief to the working poor to face the consequences of the lockdown?

Q8. Now that it's been a year since the first lockdown, what does the new normal look like for you in terms of both, household dynamics and paid employment?

Appendix – 3

Questions posed to Ms. Manisha- a daily wager during a telephonic interview on 10th April 2021

Q1. Please share your name and exact occupation.

Q2. What did the first few days of lockdown look like for you?

Q3. How has your work been affected by the pandemic-cum-lockdown, and has there been a recovery under the period of lesser restrictions?

Q4. What were some of the challenges you faced regarding transport and commute when lockdown restrictions became less stringent?

Q5. Did you have savings to help you over the period of lockdown or did you have to avail loans? Are you paying off debts?

Q6. During the past year of difficulties, what kind of changes occurred in your household? Have tensions grown not only within your work sphere but your household as well?

Q7. What effect did the lockdown have on your children's education?

Q8. In your opinion, do you think the government has, in any way, provided some sort of relief to the working poor to face the consequences of the lockdown?

Q9. Now that it's been a year since the first lockdown, what does the new normal look like for you in terms of both, household dynamics and employment?

Appendix – 4

Table 1: Comparative Table on Wage Structures in Gurgaon, Bangalore, and Tirupur Garment Production Units

Gurgaon							
	<i>Category of Worker</i>						
	Tailor	Supervisor	Checker	Ironer	Stitcher	Helper	Piece Rate Workers
Employment Category (Regular/Casual/Contract)	Regular/Casual	Regular	Regular/Casual	Regular/Casual		Casual	Casual
Type of Skill (Skilled/Semi-skilled/Unskilled)	Skilled	Skilled	Semi-skilled	Semi-Skilled	Skilled	Unskilled	Skilled/Semi-skilled
Educational Qualification	Class I to Class VII (90% of Workers Interviewed) No Education/Class VII and Above (10% of Workers Interviewed)						
Basic Wage (Monthly)	6500	7000	5500	5300		5200	5400
Overtime Rate (Monthly)	1620	1800	1380	1320		1320	1380
PF	12 %						
ESI	1.75%						
Maternity Leave	1 Month Without Pay						
Bonus	Once a year (One fourth of the Basic Wage)						
Accident Insurance	No						
Performance Rewards	No	Yes	No				
Wage Revision	Twice a Year (Rs. 200--300)						
Paid Leaves	15--18 days						
Sick Leaves	Rarely (Without Pay)						
Sexual Harassment	Yes						

Source: (Ganguly 2013)

Bangalore							
	Category of Worker						
	Tailor	Supervisor	Checker	Ironer	Stitcher	Helper	Piece Rate Workers
Employment Category (Regular/Casual/Contract)	Casual/Contract		Contract	Contract	Casual/Contract		
Type of Skill (Skilled/Semi-skilled/Unskilled)	Skilled		Semi-Skilled	Semi-skilled	Skilled		
Educational Qualification	Class I to Class VII (95% of Workers Interviewed) No Education/Class VII and Above (5% of Workers Interviewed)						
Basic Wage (Monthly)	5915		5200	5330	5395		
Overtime Rate (Monthly)	1000		880	880	920		
PF	12 %						
ESI	1.75%						
Maternity Leave	Yes (One and a Half Months with Pay)						
Bonus	No						
Accident Insurance	No						
Performance Rewards	Rs. 200 (Attendance Reward)						
Wage Revision	Once a Year and Highly Irregular (Rs. 400--700)						
Paid Leaves	15--18 days						
Sick Leaves	Rarely (Without Pay)						
Sexual Harassment	Yes						

Source: (Ganguly 2013)

Tirupur							
	Category of Worker						
	Tailor	Supervisor	Checker	Ironer	Stitcher	Helper	Piece Rate Workers
Employment Category (Regular/Casual/Contract)	Casual/Contract	Regular/Casual	Casual/Contract	Casual/Contract	Casual/Contract		
Type of Skill (Skilled/Semi-skilled/Unskilled)	Skilled	Skilled	Semi-skilled	Semi-skilled/Skilled	Semi-skilled/Skilled		
Educational Qualification	Up to Class VII (More than 95% of the Workers Interviewed)						
Basic Wage (Monthly)	7310	7000	5750	9250 (Iron Master)	6760		
Overtime Rate (Monthly)	620	600	480	790	560		
PF	12%						
ESI	1.75%						
Maternity Leave	Yes (Two Months with Pay)						
Bonus	Yearly Bonus of 8.33% on the Basic Wage						
Accident Insurance	No						
Transport Facility	Yes (Pick and Drop Service Provided)						
Performance Rewards	Yes						
Wage Revision	Yearly on the Basis of a Five-Year Tripartite Wage Agreement (Increment of 20% after the first year, 4% after the second year, and 3% after the third and the fourth years)						
Paid Leaves	15--18 days						
Sick Leaves	Yes (With Pay)						
Sexual Harassment	No						

Source: (Ganguly 2013)

Appendix – 5

Questions posed in the interaction with Dr. Indrani Mazumdar, Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), Delhi. The interview was conducted online via Google Meet on the 16th of March 2021.

Q. What have been some of the key employment trends in the garment industry in India over the past few decades?

Q. Can you briefly highlight about the average working conditions and major challenges faced by the garment industry workers, especially women workers?

Q. What has been the experience of homebased garment workers during the lockdown?

Q. What does the involvement of women workers look like in trade unions that are active in the garment industry?

Q. What are the implication of the new labour codes on women's employment in this industry?



Appendix – 6

Questions posed in the interaction with Comrade Narendar Pandey, garment worker in Noida and a trade unionist. The interview was conducted on the 23rd of March 2021, via telephone.

Q. Please tell us a little bit about yourself.

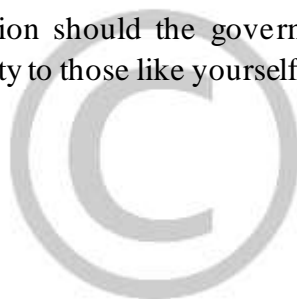
Q. What trends in employment -unemployment and wages post-lockdown have you witnessed in the garment industry in Noida?

Q. Could you explain the conditions for work for the women in workers in industry, and the impact of the lockdown on their livelihood?

Q. What were the major difficulties faced by your household and other factory employees during the lockdown?

Q. What is your opinion about the Labour laws that have been recently amended, how do you think that those laws concerning women especially would impact their lives.

Q. What measures in your opinion should the government have undertaken during the lockdown, to safe the guard security to those like yourself?



Appendix – 7

Questions posed in the interaction with Lalsi Devi, a woman garment worker in Noida. The interview was conducted on 31st March 2021, via telephone.

1. Name (आपका नाम क्या है?) –
2. Age: (आपकी उम्र क्या है?) –
3. At what age did you start working? (आपने किस उम्र में काम करना शुरू कर दिया था?)-
4. Marital Status? (क्या आपकी शादी हो चुकी है?)
5. Number of children, if any? (क्या आपके कोई बच्चे हैं? अगर हैं तो कितने?)
6. Nature of work: (आप किस प्रकार का काम करते हैं (1) फैक्ट्री (2) घर से (3) कहीं और?)
7. Average number of working hours in a day: (प्रतिदिन आप कितने घंटे काम करते हैं?)
8. Salary monthly basis: (आपको घंटे के हिसाब से कितने रुपये मिलते हैं?):
9. Work environment (Any instance of harassment faced by anyone you know or yourself): (क्या आपने कभी काम के दौरान किसी सहेली या जानकार में किसी तरह की छेड़खानी या भेदभाव का अनुभव किया है?)
10. Any instance of delay in payment of wages? (क्या कभी आपको वेतन मिलने में देरी हुई है?)
11. If yes, then how often there is a delay? (यदि हाँ, तो कितनी बार देरी हुई है?)
12. Do you get paid for overtime work? (क्या आपको overtime या अधिक समय तक काम करने के पैसे मिलते हैं?)
13. Are you affiliated with any trade union?
14. During the lockdown last year did you face any of the following? (क्या आपने lockdown के दौरान इनमें से कोई भी चीज़ महसूस की?)
 - Loss in wages due for completed work. (काम पुरा करने के बाद भी पैसे ना मिलना।)
 - Reduction in wage for future work. (आगे के काम के लिए वेतन काटना।)
 - Loss of job. (नौकरी से निकालना।)
 - Increase in overtime without pay. (काम के घंटे बढ़ाना बिना वेतन के।)
 - Difficulty to provide two-time meals for yourself or the family. (अपने लिए या परिवार के लिए दो रोटी जमा करने में दिक्कत।)
 - Difficulty to return to work, even after factory operations resumed. (Mention the reasons) (फैक्ट्री या काम पर जाने में दिक्कत होना । कारण बताएं)
15. Describe the difficulties faced during the lockdown? (क्या आप संक्षेप में लॉकडाउन के कारण दिक्कत तो के बारे में बता सकती हैं?)
16. Did you receive any help in terms of cash or kind from (1) Employer (2) Government (3) NGOs (4) Trade union? (क्या आपको आपके साथी या सरकार से या NGO से या मालिक से नकद या किसी तरह की मदद मिली है?)
17. If obtained monetary relief from employer during the lockdown, were you expected to pay it back later? (यदि लॉकडाउन के दौरान नियोजक से मौद्रिक राहत प्राप्त की जाती है, तो क्या आपको बाद में भुगतान करने की उम्मीद थी?)
18. Did you take alternate jobs to sustain a livelihood post lockdown? (Lockdown के दौरान क्या आपको अपने परिवार चलाने के लिए कोई और जॉब पकड़नी पड़ी?)
19. Is there anything you think the government could have done differently, to reduce the burden of lockdown on women workers? (क्या ऐसा कुछ है जो आपको लगता है कि सरकार को महिलाओं के कामगारों पर lockdown के बोझ को कम करने के लिए अलग तरह से कर काम कर सकती थी?)

Appendix – 8

Questions posed to Dr. Neetha N., Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), Delhi, in an interaction, dated 24th February 2021:

- 1) What do you see as the **defining features** of the domestic work industry? Most of the domestic workers are forced to do many sorts of hectic works by their employers and they are also not paid properly for the work they do. So, in your opinion what all works need to be **categorised and qualified** as domestic work?
- 2) What **changes** have you seen unfold in this industry in terms of the workforce composition, the nature of work, this industry's connection to allied industries, unionisation levels, and impact of this work on the workers themselves? Correspondingly, any changes can be seen in the composition of employers, employment practices in cities apart from the metropolises, etc.?
- 3) Will **formalization of domestic work** annihilate the undervaluation of domestic work? And what all are the viable options to stop the undervaluation of domestic work. (For us, formalization indicates uniform and a fair wage rate across the country, including such workers within the labour laws, unionization of domestic workers, etc).
- 4) So, would a **uniform wage rate** across the country reduce the exploitation that domestic workers face on a large scale? What all parameters should the government choose to decide a uniform wage rate?
- 5) In your opinion what all are the possible steps the government can take to formalize this sector. Do you see the **new Labour Codes** facilitating formalization of paid domestic industry in any concrete way?
- 6) What according to you is the most **updated data** that we have on domestic workers in India? Any **useful data on the lockdown period**?
- 7) What does government data tend to indicate about this workforce?
- 8) What patterns of unemployment and reemployment in this industry have unfolded since March 2020. Any immediate observations on **how employer--employee relations in this industry have seen a change since lockdown**?
- 9) In your opinion what all steps should the government have taken and should now undertake to help the domestic workers from the pandemic effect?
- 10) Your opinion of Resident Welfare Associations and the channels of regulation that they utilize?
- 11) How have the **domestic households of domestic workers** been affected by such paid employment? What does the typical domestic worker household look like?
- 12) Your assessment of the **welfare board scheme** of intervention, especially considering the disappointing experience with the Construction Workers Welfare Board?
- 13) Any further avenues of action research on domestic workers that you would like to specify?

Appendix – 9

Questions posed to Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar, Joint Labour Commissioner, Government of West Bengal, in an interaction, dated 23rd March 2021:

- 1) According to you what should be the minimum wage rate that needs to be specified for this sector and what all parameters should be used to decide the minimum wage, i.e., on a piece rate or time rate? And how can it be implemented all throughout the sector?
- 2) How many registered unions of domestic workers are there in West Bengal and how do you see such unionization of workers ushering in changes in this sector? If there are any noteworthy changes, can you mention a monumental change unionization has brought?
- 3) West Bengal, or the larger Bengal and Assam region have now become the key hotbeds of distress migration, from which many impoverished migrant women are taking up paid domestic work in big cities within and beyond W. Bengal. Is this trend true?
- 4) What is your opinion on the ILO Convention 189 definition of domestic workers? Many activists in this field do not actually agree with this definition of domestic worker provided by the Convention, so we wanted to know your thoughts on this.
- 5) What are certain notable trends or changes in this sector over the past 10-15 years (i.e. changing caste composition, regional/district composition of this labour force, change in type of work extracted, the extent of formalization in this sector, etc. when compared with the early decades)
- 6) What do you see as the defining features of the domestic work industry? Most of the domestic workers are forced to do many sorts of hectic work by their employers and they are also not paid properly for the work they do. So, in your opinion what all works need to be categorized and qualified as domestic work?
- 7) Which is a best way to formalize the sector -- is it formalized contracts between the employer and employee or sector-specific regulations formulated by the government?
- 8) Will a Welfare Board be an adequate guarantee of formalization of this kind of work relations? Now with the Labour Codes can we expect such Boards to be formed and offer any relief?
- 9) How responsive our local labour offices to complaints of domestic workers, and what kind of complaints get registered with the labour department?
- 10) Which states do you identify as the more proactive states when it comes to regulation of the paid domestic work industry?
- 11) What according to you is the most updated data that we have on domestic workers in India? Any useful data on the lockdown period?

12) In your opinion what all steps did the central and state governments take to help the domestic workers from the pandemic effect? Were these measures adequately enforced and did they provide the desired effect?

13) What does this sector look like now, i.e., post the pandemic?

14) Have migrant domestic workers returned to work / been reemployed in significant numbers, or are these workers staying on their villages?

15) Any further avenues of action research on domestic workers that you would like to specify?

Appendix – 10

Questions posed to domestic workers during telephonic interactions covering the period March – April 2020

(Personal details)

1. Your name and age?
2. If you are comfortable, can you share your caste details?
3. Are you married; who all are in your family?
4. Are you the only working person in your family?
5. Where are you originally from? (Your village/hometown)
6. Which cities / where all have you worked [*be ready to note down names of housing societies/localities in addition to cities*]

(Job-related)

1. How did you locate your job? Generally, how do you look for such work and get employed?
2. Are you in direct employment or work for a housekeeping agency?
3. Do you have a job card and bank account?
4. Are you in cooking, cleaning, baby-sitting/elder care, or are you attending to more than one chore?
5. What kind of work pattern you follow, is it leave in, leave out or part time. If it's part time how many houses do you work per day? [*you will have to explain the terms in Hindi/Malayalam*]
6. What are your average work timings?
7. [*In case of a full time, live-in workers*] Why did you choose full-time, live-in work?
8. Do you find yourself doing overtime? [*explain in terms of performing more work than initially agreed to/discussed with employer*]
9. What is the average wage rate in your place of work? [*try to make a note of any differences in wages across cooking, cleaning and nanny-related work*]
10. (a) How much do you personally earn?
10. (b) By when is your salary released and do you get it in hand?
11. (a) What do you think of madams/usual employers?
11. (b) Do you think madams have a lot of power?
12. Do you think you get a fair wage for the work you do?
13. Could you take leave easily – what was the structure of leave and rest?
14. Are there many children who are employed for domestic work where you are employed?

(Lockdown related)

1. Were you paid during the lockdown period?
2. Any pending wages of February//March 2020 which got stuck?
3. (a) Did the employee call you immediately after the lockdown relaxation? If not, when did you resume to work?
3. (b) To get back the job, what all stipulations did you need to meet?
4. Has there been a reduction in your salary due to or post the pandemic?
5. Do you feel there has been an increase in your workload with rejoining?
6. (a) Did you migrate back to the village? Why did you / did you not go back?
6. (b) If you migrated back to the village, when did you move and how did you reach home?

7. What are the main difficulties you faced during the lockdown phase?
8. What all difficulties do you face even after the relaxation of the lockdown?
9. Did you take any loan from local moneylenders / from employer / extended family during the lockdown to finance your needs? Are you able to make the repayments or do you find yourself in debt?
10. Was there any difficulties in meeting the online mode of education for your children?
11. What all precautions did you take against COVID, and still continue to take? You are aware of these precautions?
12. What were the reliefs you got from the government?
13. Were you able to access PDS ration on a monthly basis and was it provided for free?
14. Did some NGOs or trade unions come to your rescue during this time, like providing you with food, medicine and other aids?
15. Were you able to access healthcare? [*Be ready to quote an example to explain the question*]

(Related to workers' action)

1. Have you ever complained about employers at the Police Station or at Labour Department?
2. Have you had to pay for verification by Police?
3. Do you belong to a trade union? Do you know of unions that exist?
4. Have you ever been part of a strike; if yes, what was gained?



Appendix – 11

Questions were posed to Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar, Joint Labour Commissioner, Government of West Bengal. These questions were centred around the period before the lockdown.

- Q1) How many construction workers are there in India?
- Q2) How far are construction workers unionised in the country? How would you describe a typical construction site in urban India?
- Q3) What were the average wage rates that construction workers availed prior to the lockdown?
- Q4) Have the construction workers been hesitant in registering themselves with the government, after the transition to an online registration process?
- Q5) Did construction workers have adequate access to various forms of social security before the lockdown?
- Q6) Have women construction workers increased in the construction industry in the recent years?
- Q7) What is known about the phenomenon of sexual harassment of women construction workers at construction sites, to whom did they report such incidents, and whether these cases get officially resolved?
- Q8) What are the different forms of challenges that women construction workers had to face prior to the lockdown?
- Q9) What are the facilities given to construction workers who met with an accident at the construction site before the lockdown?
- Q10) Registered construction workers can avail of what other benefits?

Questions posed to Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar, which were centred around the lockdown period and how the lockdown affected the construction workers:

- Q1) What were the immediate effects of the lockdown on women construction workers?
- Q2) Your views on the announcement, planning and implementation of the lockdown which many see as being haphazardly announced and how the government failed to think of the workers working in the informal sector?
- Q3) Why did the migrant construction workers not remain in the cities and instead walked kilometres to reach their villages?
- Q4) Did the government or contractors provide any form of medical assistance to construction workers?
- Q5) Were the construction workers provided with safety equipment such as masks and sanitizers to protect themselves from COVID-19 as construction sites slowly reopened?

Q6) Your comments on the government's inadequate approach towards the documentation and recording of the conditions of construction workers?

Q7) Your opinion on the role that the civil society played in helping migrant construction workers?

Q8) How can the access to government-based benefits be improved in the future?

Questions posed to Dr. Kingshuk Sarkar about the post lockdown period:

Q1) Were migrant construction workers forced to stay back in cities by contractors although they wanted to go back home?

Q2) Did construction workers receive their due wages of the previous months after the lockdown was lifted?

Q3) Your comments on whether construction workers managed to get their previous jobs back?

Q4) Which body/bodies helped the construction workers during and after the lockdown? Was it the contractors, the subcontracting companies or the government?

Q5) Are construction workers being subjected to longer working hours, heavier workload after the lockdown was lifted and construction work gradually resumed?

Q6) So you believe that the visibility of construction workers became even more prominent because of the lockdown?

Appendix – 12

The following questions were posed to the trade unionist, Comrade Alok Kumar of Delhi Nirman Mazdoor Sangharsh Samiti. These questions were centred around the period before the lockdown.

- Q1) How many construction workers are there in India?
- Q2) How far are the construction workers unionised in India?
- Q3) How would you describe a typical construction site in urban India?
- Q4) An online registration process for the construction workers was adopted before the lockdown, did this change make construction workers hesitant in registering themselves with the government?
- Q5) Was there any form of social security of the construction workers before the lockdown?
- Q6) Have the women construction workers increased in the construction industry?
- Q7) What were the different forms of challenges that women construction workers had to face?
- Q8) What facilities were provided if any Construction workers met with an accident at the construction site before the lockdown?

Questions posed to Comrade Alok Kumar, which were centred around the lockdown period and how the lockdown affected the construction workers:

- Q1) What were some of the immediate effects on the women construction workers when the lockdown was announced?
- Q2) Did the government think about the migrant workers working in the informal sector, while planning the lockdown?
- Q3) Were the construction workers provided with masks, sanitizers or any other equipment that would keep them safe from the coronavirus by the government?
- Q4) The central government had no records of the migrant workers who walked to their villages, when inquired by the civil society. Was this negligible behaviour by the government towards informal workers, persistent even on ordinary days?
- Q5) Was only the civil society at the forefront in helping the population of migrant workers including construction workers during the lockdown?

Questions posed to Comrade Alok Kumar about the post lockdown period:

- Q1) Were the construction workers able to get back their previous jobs after the lockdown? (Please comment specifically with respect to women construction workers).

Q2) Did the construction workers receive the wages of the previous months after the lockdown was opened?

Q3) Which body should be held accountable for treating the construction workers in an inhumane way?

Q4) Were the construction workers subjected to work load, long working hours and low wages after the lockdown?



Appendix – 13

Questions posed to Dr. Shalini, Assistant Professor at a women's college in U.P., during an interaction on 27th March 2021:

Q1. Please share your name and occupation.

Q2. Are most of your students from different socio-economic backgrounds?

Q3. In what way has there been a change in quality of education since transitioning to the online mode?

Q4. Were the students given access to resources such as study material by the university?

Q5. What role did the college administration play during the pandemic?

Q6. How did you manage to cope with online education alongside the burden of increased housework?

Q7. What has your overall experience with online teaching been like?

Q8. Do you believe that online teaching should be considered as a substitute for offline teaching?



Appendix – 14

Questions posed to students from the Delhi University's School of Open Learning (SOL) and Non-Collegiate Women's Education Board (NCWEB), in a group interview dated 2nd April 2021:

Q1. How did the virtual way of teaching during the pandemic impact the quality of education that was being imparted?

Q2. What were some of the challenges you faced with respect to the online mode of teaching and examinations?

Q3. Do you believe that online teaching should be considered as a substitute for offline classroom teaching?

Q4. What are your views on the gender disparities witnessed in families with more than one child, especially one of them being male, when it became difficult for the parents to bear the financial burden of arranging sufficient technical equipment, fees etc, of all their children and they ultimately preferred the male child?

Q5. How did you manage to cope up with online education given the increased amount of workload owing to the division of labor at home which is largely unequal with the burden of work mainly borne by the women?

Q6. In what ways have differences between regular college students and those of SOL and NCWEB increased due to the shift to the virtual mode of teaching?

Q7. Do you think that online classes and the government's rigorous attempts to promote digitalization of education will increase parent's preference for the online mode of education for their daughters in the future?

Q8. Were you provided with any sort of relief with respect to assignments, exams and college-related work or when the pressure rather increased?

Q9. How significantly has the restriction due to the lockdown impacted your overall learning process since colleges are spaces for personal growth through extra-curricular activities?

Q10. What are your views on the fact that the lockdown period and the period of partial lifting of lockdown has been seen worldwide as triggering a silent pandemic of domestic violence? How do these hostile home environments affect the learning environment?

Appendix – 15

Questions posed to Ms. Jyoti, a Dalit woman student and activist located in Dharodi Village, Jind District, Haryana, in an interaction, dated 1st April 2021:

Q1. What has the Dalit student's experience been like with the online teaching-learning process?

Q2. Were there any provisions made by the government or the village authorities to manage online teaching?

Q3. What were some of the problems that students faced during lockdown apart from the issues revolving around their studies?

