

Crisis behind Closed Doors

Domestic Workers' Struggles during the Pandemic and Beyond

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The impact of the national lockdown due to COVID-19 on domestic workers in New Delhi and Gurugram is examined. Through extensive surveys with members of three labour unions, it was found that not only were domestic workers able to find less work, but were also paid lower wages, while unable to access government schemes or financial or in-kind support from their employers. This points to a dire need for policies that protect domestic workers' interests.

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Domestic work, like most of the global care economy, largely comprises work done inside the household such as cleaning, washing clothes and utensils, cooking, childcare and elderly care. This work is done across cities in India by poor and unskilled migrant women, from marginalised communities, coming from rural districts in India. Their work is invisible, undervalued, and unrecognised. While some estimates are available, the exact numbers of domestic workers in India remain unavailable. Government estimates (NSS 2005) indicate this number to be close to 4.75 million, while the civil society claims this to be a gross under-estimation, with real figures being close to 50 million domestic workers in India (WIEGO 2014).

The literature so far has documented the financial toll on domestic workers and other informal workers because of the government-imposed lockdown in 2020. The lockdown disproportionately hit India's informal and unregulated sector workers who are engaged in manual work, yet this impact remains largely unquantified. Additionally, the lockdown had a worse impact on women, who lost their jobs first, and were the slowest to recover (Chiplunkar et al 2020). Since domestic workers work in a private household without a formal work contract, job losses amongst their employers, who are usually urban employees, has exacerbated their plight. Financial strain in the households they work in can impact not only whether they have a job at all, but also the wages they receive and the environment in these households.

The informal and unregulated nature of such work has made domestic workers a blind spot in policymaking. The inherent subjugation of domestic work and the atypical nature of the work with the workspace being a private space, makes

regulation and implementation challenging. The registration under the Unorganised Workers State Social Security Board is difficult and migrant domestic workers are not protected under the Inter-state Migrant Workmen Act, 1979. Cases of employer apathy and abuse go unreported as there is no reporting mechanism such as an active domestic workers helpline.

Additionally, local authorities such as resident welfare associations (RWAs) lack incentives to cater to their needs. The RWAs currently behave as regulatory bodies to protect employers and not domestic workers. The RWAs have indulged in discriminatory practices such as barring the use of common spaces and promoting the stigmatisation of workers, instead of taking steps to ensure domestic workers' safety rights, safety gear, training on social distancing norms within the household, and training on mask and usage of other safety gear (Dayal 2020). These discriminatory practices for any individual can lead to heightened feelings of fatigue and isolation.

The RWAs should be empowering domestic workers and other informal workers with information on safety protocols to make them feel safer while working, instead of withholding important information from them. While communication is effective between residents in a gated community, there are no mechanisms in place to inform domestic workers and other informal workers working in the residential colonies about COVID-19 cases in their workplace. In the event an employer tests positive, there are no mandates to make sure the domestic workers will be provided paid leave and workers will have access to testing.

This study aims to understand the current condition of domestic workers as they commence work during the pandemic, more than six months after lockdowns restrictions were relaxed in December 2020. The struggles of denied wages, blocked phone numbers of domestic workers and higher workload to take advantage of the desperation of domestic workers during the lockdown has been documented (John 2020). The literature also talks about more subtle forms of apathy towards domestic workers such as denial of the use of common spaces that

have been exacerbated by the lockdown (Ghosh et al 2020). The study looks at practices being followed inside the house, the workload on domestic workers, their working environments, and the stress they face. The survey undertaken examines these unique employer–employee relationships and sheds light on one of the most vulnerable workplaces—the home.

Methodology

In December 2020, we conducted a phone survey of 75 domestic workers based in New Delhi and Gurugram, Haryana to understand their condition as they return to work post the lockdown. Our sample consisted of domestic workers from three labour unions who had shared phone numbers of their members with us. The labour unions helped us in getting in touch with respondents over the phone during a time when in-person surveying was unfeasible.

We completed all 75 interviews via telephone, employing a structured interview method after taking consent from all respondents. To ensure that respondents felt comfortable answering questions over the phone about their working environments and sharing the stress they face in their life, the survey team was made up entirely of female enumerators.

However, owing to survey completion via telephonic surveys, our results exclude women without their own mobile phone or those who are unable to use one, who are perhaps the most vulnerable groups. Many families without a single mobile phone, or women whose husbands control their interaction via telephone, will remain unreachable. We can assume that these groups are facing even more difficulty in getting work or demanding pending wages post the lockdown. We had difficulties in reaching domestic workers for whom we had a contact number in

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Respondents by Home State

State	Frequency	%
Bihar	8	10.67
Delhi	17	22.67
Haryana	1	1.33
Jharkhand	1	1.33
Madhya Pradesh	1	1.33
Uttar Pradesh	15	20.00
West Bengal	32	42.67
Total	75	100.00

Source: Authors' survey.

their villages. Additionally, some live-in domestic workers were unable to complete the survey owing to fears of having the conversation overheard by their employer and that their visits back home in a private location were limited.

Profile of Respondents

The survey was conducted with part-time, full-time, and live-in domestic workers from Delhi and Gurugram. The respondents ranged from ages 17–60 years with the average age being 37 years. Of the respondents, 91% were married and 9% were widowed. Only 24% respondents were residents of the state where they work. The home states for respondents are given in Table 1. Among the respondents, 42% belong to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes or Other Backward Classes. And, in terms of religion, 57% respondents were Hindu, 41% respondents were Muslim and 1% were Christian (Table 2).

Table 2: Religious Background of Respondents

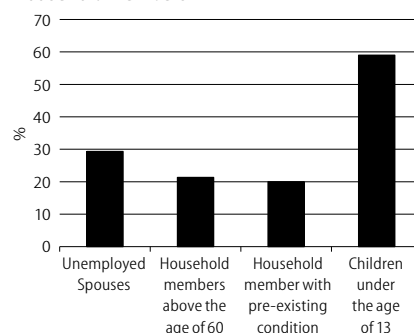
Religion	Frequency	%
Hindu	43	57.33
Muslim	31	41.33
Christian	1	1.33
Total	75	100.00

Source: Same as Table 1.

The average family size in our sample is 5.24 with size ranging from 1–12, with 76% domestic workers having four or more household members. This reflects domestic workers' responsibilities, both in terms of financially supporting their family members and of unpaid work inside their household. In their families, 29% were the sole earning member. The domestic workers also had elderly and high-risk household members to support with 21% domestic workers living with household members above 60 years of age and 20% having household members suffering from serious health conditions, making them more vulnerable to COVID-19 complications (Figure 1). Among the respondents, 76% had two or more children and 59% had children under the age of 13 (Figure 1).

Living with vulnerable and dependent household members also compels domestic workers to take up work again despite concerns for personal safety. Safeda Khatoon's husband lost his job after the lockdown. With two young children in school and an ailing mother-in-law, she

Figure 1: Respondents with Vulnerable Household Members



Source: Authors' survey.

was compelled to go back to work when one household called back. She said, "How will I pay school fees, buy medicines or run my household if I don't work?"

Post-lockdown Recovery

Even in December, more than six months after lockdown restrictions were first lifted, about 31% of respondents still had not found any work. Those who were unable to find work were all previously employed in full-time domestic work and had no alternate means of earning income. Prior to the lockdown, they would earn ₹8,000 working in three houses on average. Only a quarter of these respondents received support from their employers during the lockdown.

About 40% of the domestic workers who were not called back were over the age of 40. A survey conducted in Bengaluru also documented the discrimination against older domestic workers, where 50% of domestic workers over the age of 50 had lost their jobs during the lockdown (Menon 2020). Our survey also finds that apart from other responsibilities such as washing dishes, cleaning, and childcare, 74% of the domestic workers who were not called back were involved in cooking food owing to fears of high virus transmission.

Anita Devi who hails from Bihar was a cook before the lockdown and had not found any work. When her employer's husband tested positive for COVID-19, she was told to not come to work. She was unable to collect her pending wages and did not receive any money to get herself or her family of seven tested. Anita Devi's story is by no means an exception. Older domestic workers and those engaged in cooking food have had an especially difficult time finding work.

Some respondents were also asked to either become live-in domestic workers or if they were already live-in domestic workers, to drastically limit their visits outside, to continue working. Tara Devi is 17 years and was a live-in domestic worker prior to the lockdown. She was told that she could not visit her family anymore over the weekend or on special holidays, if she wished to continue working. Tara, who in addition to cleaning the household also took care of the children and pets, was unhappy with the ultimatum as it had been months since she had met her own family. Gauri Mandal, also found herself in a similar situation with the employer's household demanding she transition from a full-time job to a live-in help. However, since Gauri had an elderly parent and two children, she could not leave them alone at home. Both Tara and Gauri were permanently let go from their job when they refused to work under these terms and, since then, have not found jobs.

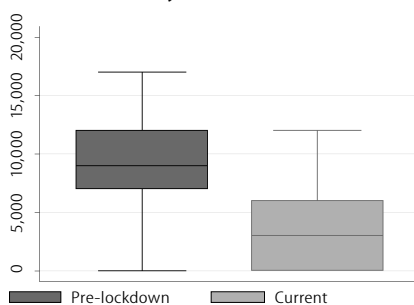
We also encountered many cases in our survey where the respondents had been forced to go back to their villages to save expenses at the start of the lockdown and were financially unable to come back. Many respondents having received no support from their employers during the lockdown or even their pending wages were still burning through their savings while being stuck in their homes with bleak job prospects. They were unable to save enough to return to the city and incur the high living expenses as they looked for a job.

Income and Workload Details

The average income before the lockdown was just above ₹9,000, while the average income in December was 60% lesser at ₹3,700 (Figure 2). The number of houses that a domestic worker worked for halved, with the average domestic worker now working at only two houses (Figure 3).

More than a quarter of respondents reported increased responsibilities and expanded workloads in the house. The informal and unorganised nature of domestic work enables employers to modify the work demanded from those agreed to mutually, subject to their requirements. The employers are now

Figure 2: Box Plots Comparing Average Income of Domestic Workers before and after the Lockdown (Monthly Income in ₹)



Source: Same as Figure 1.

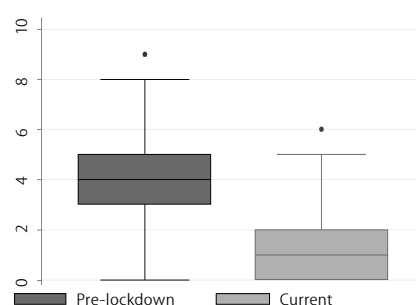
misusing the desperate condition of domestic workers to extract a higher quantum of work without adequate compensation. Based on our inquiries, almost all respondents had worked all the days of the previous week without a holiday, with an average of about five hours spent at work.

Among the respondents, 31% used a shared vehicle like an autorickshaw, bus or van to commute to work. The respondents using shared vehicles reported longer waiting times, higher cost of local transport and fear of themselves and consequently their family members contracting the virus. Owing to these concerns, some respondents switched to commuting long distances on foot instead of taking shared transportation. Due to the disturbances in public transportation and higher cost of living during the lockdown, it was reported that domestic workers were forced to relocate further away from their place of work (Gomez 2020). This meant they had to travel longer distances to houses that were still calling them or were unable to commute to work till public transportation resumed.

Government and Employer Support

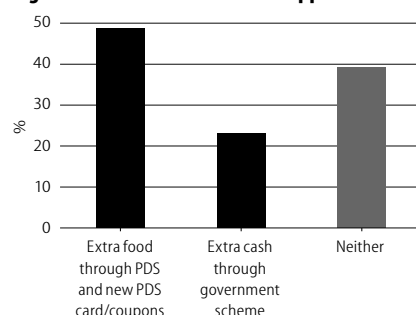
Nearly half of our respondents said they were able to access extra food through the public distribution system (PDS), but only 23% could avail of extra cash related schemes launched during the lockdown. One-third of the respondents were unable to access extra food- or cash-related schemes launched by the government (Figure 4). Of the respondents who were unable to access government schemes, 80% did not belong to Delhi or Haryana. It has been documented that many domestic workers are migrants, who only possess

Figure 3: Box Plots Comparing Average Number of Houses Domestic Workers Work at before and after the Lockdown



Source: Same as Figure 1.

Figure 4: Access to Government Support



Source: Same as Figure 1.

documentation from their permanent homes in their villages, and hence are not able to acquire ration cards where they work (Rana 2020). This highlights the immediate need to include domestic workers in the social security net not only for immediate relief, but also for long-term support. Expansion of the PDS is imperative to ensure coverage of vulnerable groups and the "One Nation, One Ration" initiative is particularly crucial to ensure food security in such crises given the large number of migrants, specifically in the case of domestic workers, and broadly those involved in informal work.

Rashida Begum said that the disparities in access were not just limited to their state of origin, but also to the status of their employers. She remarked, "These people working in colonies are the only ones who get access to food. What about us? Who will look after the rest of us?" The administrative and distributive concerns with respect to the access to these government schemes for domestic workers was reported during the lockdown, but no special provisions were made (Mohan et al 2020).

We also inquired about additional support from employers. Nearly two-thirds of our sample said that none of the houses

they worked for gave them any support. Under a quarter of the respondents said that only one house gave them support, either financially or in kind by helping them with food grain. Respondents expressed pain at the manner that they had been turned away from households they had worked at for long periods of time. Some remarked that while these households would call these domestic workers a part of their family, at the time of need they were unable to get any support from these households and in fact employers had resorted to blocking their numbers and refusing to take their calls for help. Despite working at a household for over 25 years, Jayashree shared that the household did not give her any financial help or foodgrain even after she had reached out for support multiple times.

Household Practices

Nearly two-thirds of our sample said that the household(s) they work at now ensure that they wear masks and maintain social distancing when working. Just under 40% said that they were the only one wearing a mask in the house. A quarter of the respondents mentioned that their temperature was checked at the gate before entering the household, while 80% said that they were required to wash their hands before commencing work (Table 3).

Table 3: Safety Practice Followed within Households

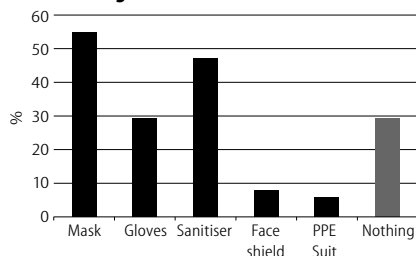
Safety Practice	Frequency	%
Other members of the household wear masks	34	65.38
Household practices social distancing	35	67.31
Only respondent wears mask	20	38.46
Temperature check at gate	14	26.92
Washing hands before commencing work	42	80.77

Source: Authors' survey.

Nearly half the respondents said they were provided with sanitisers; however, some respondents mentioned that they did not use these safety items as they were difficult to work with and slowed them down. Only in 8% of the cases did the household demand a negative COVID-19 test result prior to resuming work. Further, over half the respondents said that their employer provided them with masks when working, and just under a third stated that they also received gloves for work. Under 10% of the respondents said

that none of these safety measures were provided by the households they work for (Figure 5). As a note, our surveys asked the respondents whether at least one household was undertaking the mentioned safety practices and providing safety materials. Thus, given the multiple employer–employee relationships that domestic workers have, these practices differ from household to household and are not indicative of all households.

Figure 5: Does Your Employer Provide You with the Following?



Source: Authors' survey.

More importantly, not all the respondents worked for households inside gated communities. Many of the practices, such as temperature checks at the gate or sufficient provision of sanitisers, are managed by the housing society management and not necessarily reflective of household-level practices. Additionally, facilities available and rules enforced by gated communities not only play a role in safety, but also the amount of strain placed on domestic workers. Nearly 20% of the sample mentioned that they were denied the use of facilities such as elevators, common washrooms and rest time in society parks and common areas.

Respondents whose employers tested positive for COVID-19 said they got between 14 days and 30 days off, with two-thirds getting themselves tested on hearing about the employer test results. However, no respondent was reimbursed for COVID-19 test expenses. Additionally, no respondent got their families tested in the event they had come in contact with their employers who tested positive. While only 5% of the sample said their employer was infected, many voiced concerns that the employer did not have an obligation to inform the domestic worker if the employer was infected or was showing symptoms. While cases continue to rise within residential colonies, there is no set communication

channel to inform domestic workers about who has tested positive within gated apartment complexes. While some gated communities prohibited any movement into such households, including domestic workers, cases may exist where domestic workers continued to work in households with an infected member.

Respondent Stress

Many respondents, when asked to share about general stress, fears and anxieties, talked about financial troubles, fear of the disease and contracting it and spreading it to their family members, and the burden of debt. Housing and house rents were another major concern. As most domestic workers are migrants, they have to manage their expenses and also send money to their families back home.

Sangita Kumari is the sole earning member of her family. Expenses are rising, savings dwindling, while job opportunities remain stagnant. Afsana Khatun also remarks that she is not just worried about current and future earnings, but is yet to collect pending wages from her employer who refuses to accept her calls or pay her the amount owed.

Respondents also expressed worries about the well-being of their family. There was a recurring theme of helplessness in all the interviews, as they were compelled to work, leaving their fears of COVID-19 aside, and work as per the whims of the employer. Urmila Das remarks that

If I go to work, I am scared of the virus. If I don't go to work, we cannot eat. I am scared to die, but I would rather die on a full stomach—don't you agree?

Many respondents expressed that with dependent family members, they had no choice but to take whatever work they could find and continue despite hardships in the workplace. With jobs being scarce, they could not afford to lose the ones they had managed to find. Gauri Devi was replaced for a live-in worker in the house she worked in. She expressed that with a paralysed husband and two children, she could not afford to lose the job she currently has and therefore had to agree to take on a higher quantum of work and come at any time she was called. Bordering on complete economic ruination and subsequent desperation brought on by

the lockdown, distressed domestic workers appear to be returning to even more exploitative work conditions.

Nisha Devi remarked at being unable to help her children study as they struggled to cope with virtual learning. With rising expenses and education seeming futile now, many respondents' children who would have opted to study further were dropping out of school to help their families financially.

A few stories of hope saw respondents indicate they were slowly getting back on their feet with their employers' help. These stories were mostly from domestic workers who had been sufficiently supported by employers during the lockdown or had found enough work post the lockdown. Respondents who had sufficient knowledge about safety and precautions felt more confident while going to work.

Working Environment

Among those currently working, most respondents did not specify too many issues in the workspace. Most referred to the changed environment—lesser interaction with employers. A major change reported has been the distancing maintained by members of the household towards domestic workers. In some cases, they can no longer meet their friends who worked in the same area, worsening feelings of isolation or loneliness during the workday.

Many respondents spoke about the difficulties in finding work at all, as employers can often find someone willing to accept lower wages. Some mentioned that their burden of work has increased, often at a lower pay. As many households face their own financial and personal troubles, some respondents did mention that employers displayed harsh behaviour towards them. A respondent shared that class is a major factor in employer–employee relationships, particularly informal ones like these. She said that employers believe they can behave however they would like with their domestic help as they belong to different classes. Confronted by the “private, quasi-judicial” powers of employers, domestic workers are regularly reduced to a vulnerable position in the labour process (John 2017). Preeti Kumari highlights how class dynamics prevent domestic workers from saying

anything back to their employers, even when they feel extremely belittled, as they are grateful to have any work at all:

Of course Didi scolds me, but what will she also do? She is under tension that I understand, but sometimes she scolds me so much that I feel like crying right there and then. We are poor people; we have been made to listen to scolding without saying anything back. What can I say? What will I get if I say something?

Conclusions

Loss of income and employment for domestic workers persists months after the lockdown was relaxed in 2020. Even as domestic workers return to work, feelings of isolation, fatigue and fear now accompany their daily lives. Moreover, the lockdown has exposed the cracks within the pre-existing nature of this work and the vulnerabilities that these domestic workers are exposed to every day as they go to work. While our research was conducted six months after the first lockdown, our findings remain relevant even now as the country deals with even greater loss of life and income over a year after the first lockdown. Given the magnitude of the wave in early 2021, the losses will be further exacerbated.

Loss of income requires further examination, especially as we are now dealing with a second wave that has left domestic workers in a more precarious situation owing to tighter finances and concerns about their safety. There is a lot of scope for future research as the loss of income should continue to be examined specially as we are now over a year after the lockdown was first imposed and as more and more workers keep returning from their home states to come back to work. Similar studies should be conducted to understand the lives of domestic workers in other major cities, tier 2 cities and with larger sample sizes. In-person surveys allow in accessing the experiences of domestic workers who own no telephones and are among the most vulnerable and face great difficulties in finding work and accessing information.

This study, amongst others, is reflective of the pandemic's transformative power on the lives and work of domestic workers. Our work highlights the need for continued efforts in data collection and

analysis of the impact the pandemic has had on those employed in domestic work. Domestic workers' vulnerabilities can only be addressed when the current labour laws empower them with conscious inclusion in legislation and in ensuring social security coverage for them. Further research must also study where domestic workers fit into existing legislation, in the context of the pandemic. Additionally, a normative shift in perceptions of domestic work is imperative which requires a closer examination of the nexus of class, gender, and labour relations, particularly in the way employer–employee relationships play out in the household.

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