

act:onaid

ISOLATE DON'T ABANDON

Helping **INFORMAL**
WORKERS cope with
the **COVID-19** crisis



ISOLATE, DON'T ABANDON

Helping **INFORMAL WORKERS** cope with the COVID-19 crisis






First Published April, 2020

Some rights reserved



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Provided they acknowledge the source, users of this content are allowed to remix, tweak, build upon and share for non-commercial purposes under the same original license terms.

act:onaid

  actionaidindia  @actionaid_india  @actionaidcomms
ActionAid Association, R - 7, Hauz Khas Enclave, New Delhi - 110016
 +911-11-4064 0500

ISOLATE, DON'T ABANDON

Helping **INFORMAL WORKERS** cope
with the COVID-19 crisis



he outbreak of COVID-19 in India has laid bare the precarity of life for millions in India. More than 90 per cent of the Indian workforce works in the informal economy. The livelihoods of these informal workers have been manifestly disrupted for the foreseeable future. Informal workers is a category that includes daily wage workers, domestic workers, home-based workers, vendors, and gig workers working in construction sites, factories, malls, hotels and households across the country. They have been rendered jobless and incomeless in the aftermath of the nation-wide lockdown. With no avenues to earn wages and few savings to tide them over, they are struggling to provide food and other essential items for their families.

While the middle and upper classes is locked inside their homes, informal workers, a majority of whom are migrants, are at risk of losing theirs. The threat of eviction looms large for many due to their inability to pay rent. Several workers, such as construction workers, factory workers, brick kiln workers, and plantation workers, who live at their work sites have been displaced due to the abrupt closure of these places.

Due to the non-portability of entitlements across states, these workers remain devoid of schemes such as the public distribution system (PDS), integrated child development services (ICDS) and even the PM Ujjwala Yojna, and struggle to access services such as healthcare, education and social security. Women informal workers are especially susceptible to being ineligible for social security and welfare schemes, as registration usually happens at the household level in the name of the primary male earner.

In the absence of these most basic of protections, it is no wonder that more than lakhs of workers have taken to the highways to try and get back

home.¹ They are not only worried about their next meal, but also fearful of an outbreak of infection in the overcrowded informal settlements and slum clusters where they live. In these places, water is a scarce resource, toilets are often shared, and social distancing is a non-starter. For many informal workers, severe or prolonged illness is the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back, pushing them into abject poverty.

Unfortunately, these migrant workers are being subjected to abuse and violence by authorities for violating the lockdown in many parts of the country. They are being labelled as irresponsible by several sections of the media and the public. They are being treated as suspected disease carriers, to be contained and sanitised. The stigma that has been attached to migrants over the past couple of weeks is so severe that it has even led to rejection in their own villages, as community members are too scared to allow in the ones who make it back.

At the same time, there have been multiple reports of migrant workers from North-Eastern states having to face racist comments and other forms of harassment. Shelters and quarantine centres, have been set up to stop the movement of migrant workers,² and there are reports of them being overcrowded and inadequate to deal with the magnitude of the issue.³

Due to lockdown situation, there is delay in procurement of essential products as supply chains are disrupted, there is a huge demand for relief and lag in terms of distribution, the poor and marginalised people don't have enough food and essential product reserves which can help them sail through 21 days of lockdown. Many states are now considering extending the lockdown, so the situation is dire. This can lead to hunger situations in several pockets.

-
1. Quartz India, 27 March 2020 <<https://qz.com/india/1826384/indias-coronavirus-lockdown-has-triggered-mass-migration-on-foot/>>
 2. The Hindu, 7 April 2020 < <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-centre-files-report-on-migrant-workers/article31283896.ece>>
 3. Times of India, 26 March 2020 < <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/crowding-at-shelters-for-food-a-cause-for-concern/articleshow/74819129.cms>>

In the sections below we first present voices from informal workers across a variety of sectors. This is not a comprehensive selection, as there are innumerable sectors in the informal economy, but it is illustrative of the specific context across a number of the sectors ranging from rural areas which include farm workers and fish workers, to urban areas which include construction workers, street vendors, domestic workers and most marginal sections of society, including those who beg for a living. The situation faced by migrant workers are also presented here. The next section speaks about the way informal workers could be enabled to cope with the COVID-19 crisis, both in terms of preventing the spread of the infection and in terms of coping with the shutdown. Finally we try and explore how the fault lines exposed by the COVID-19 infection and the precarity of informal workers in India can be engaged with. These call for more long term interventions. We need to work on both to ensure that we succeed in achieving our goal of building an inclusive society, as it would only be realised when we ensure dignity and security to the multitudes of hitherto faceless workers in India.

1

Voices from the ground

The relief packages announced by government are still in process to reach the beneficiaries; even as these reach the intended beneficiaries many are feared to be out of that safety nets as majority of informal workers are not registered workers.

Several civil society groups and organisations are responding to the crisis on the ground by providing relief and aid to these poor and marginalised communities. ActionAid Association has been involved in providing dry rations or cooked food, and as on 8 April 2020 have been able to provide 1,40,000 families across 18 states relief, and working with local administration facilitated the supply of dry rations or cooked food to another 50,000 or more families. In this process we have captured the impact of this lockdown on these vulnerable communities.

Given below are narratives from these workers in different sectors. They throw light on the nature of some of the problems they are facing due to the spread of the virus and the lockdown and portend of the challenges to come. Government has announced relief packages and is said to be doing its best, the truth however is that is that enough and reaching all.

Farm workers

The situation of informal workers especially those in the agricultural sector in Udumalpet and Madathukulam blocks, Tiruppur district in Tamil Nadu is critical. Most agricultural workers in and around Udumalpet were engaged in coconut farming, peeling coconuts, preparation of coconut coir, making coir ropes, knitting coconut thatch, preparing organic fertilizers, applying fertilizers, rearing poultry in the agricultural farms and grazing livestock.

Agricultural workers are employed on a daily or weekly wage and often have little savings and were barely able to afford two meals a day even before the lockdown. These workers who worked as 'farmhands' are not

associated with unions and lack entitlement cards like Ration Cards and are looking at a future of deprivation and hunger.

States like Punjab which have more than 30 per cent Dalit communities dependent on agriculture have extended the lockdown till 30th April. These lives of these poor and marginalised communities are totally dependent upon farm income.

Fish workers

Another industry where workers have taken a hard hit with the lockdown is fisheries. With hardly any infrastructure on the ground level for cold chain and storage facilities and due to the perishable nature of their stock, tons of stock were dumped by those into fish vending.

Mallika is 44 years old and lives with her husband Selvam and son Madhan in the fisherfolk colony in Vizhundhamavadi village, Nagapattinam district. Her husband is a fisherman and since his income was not enough to meet the family expenses, Maheswari started working as a head load fisherwoman and would sell fish in the neighbouring villages of Vizhundhamavadi and Pudupalli. She usually earns around ₹150 per day, while her husband earns around ₹350 per day. On days when she is unable to sell the fish, they face a huge loss. To make up for the loss the family spends their savings or borrows money from others. The fishermen and women like Maheswari have not been able to go fishing since the curfew. Now with no livelihood options, the family is under severe financial distress and has exhausted all their savings.

Similar stories were received from coastal districts of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

Salt pan workers

Both Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have salt pan workers. The condition of these workers has already been precarious but with the current situation, they are now at the brink of starvation. Their work is seasonal and depends on favourable weather conditions. The work generally begins in January-February and continues in full swing between May and August. During the

subsequent months, from September to December, there is no work in the salt pans due to the rainy season. Therefore, due to changing seasons and unexpected rains, saltpan workers get work only for about seven months in a year. The wages are low and work conditions are harsh.

Maheswari, aged 31, lives with her husband and two children in Mudukkukadu village, Tuticorin district. The family belongs to the most marginalized SC community. Maheswari has been working as a saltpan worker for the last 10 years. Her husband works as a daily wage worker in construction. Her children are studying in the 2nd and 4th standards in the government primary school. The family lives on a meagre income that put them, below the poverty line. As their earnings are low, they have taken loans which they pay through daily earnings.

Due to the lockdown and imposition of restrictions, the work in the salt pans which had just began for the season was abruptly stopped, and Maheswari and other saltpan workers in Tuticorin district have lost their only source of livelihood. She and other workers had been unemployed from October to January and had only recently resumed work. Maheswari is devastated and says, “even if my family is saved from corona virus, we are unsure if we will be able to overcome our hunger and poverty”.

Migrant workers

Over the past few weeks, most migrant workers have been out of work and have exhausted their ration supplies and savings. The first wave of migration was visible from hot spots like Kerala and Maharashtra. In Pune and Mumbai, trains and buses were flooded with migrant workers from Bihar and Jharkhand. Kerala reported many workers escaping isolation and quarantine and going to Jharkhand and Bihar.

Reports have also shown that the fear and panic created by the COVID-19 crisis have forced many workers to take risks such as seeking transportation in tankers, paying bribes to middleman promising transport etc. Thousands of migrant workers have been trying to walk back home. These workers are from states like Bihar, Rajasthan, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh and were employed in various sectors in metro cities.

Raju, 19 years old, is from Agra and was working in a cycle puncture shop in Gurgaon. His employer asked him to leave work last week. He tried getting a job elsewhere but was unsuccessful. Raju wanted to go back to Agra and decided to walk with a group of labourers going in that direction. After walking for six hours and being confronted by the police, the group reached the Yamuna Expressway. They wanted to take shelter for a night in the village nearby; however, they were not allowed to enter by locals. The exhausted group slept hungry near a bus stop.

On 27 March 2020, a large group of migrants attempted to reach their native village at the Delhi-UP border. There were thousands stranded at bus stops and border check-posts until neighbouring states had to start 1000 buses to transport these migrant workers to respective states, overnight. Once inside their respective home states, these workers have been put into isolation camps.⁴ There are said to be 37978 relief camps which have been set up and catering to 14.3 lakh migrant populations in state borders. The news reports of these campsites and the hostility with which these home-bound migrant workers are treated with has been shocking. The images of migrant workers being forced behind bars and sprayed with chemicals to sanitize them have been so concerning that the Supreme Court has even directed officials to treat migrants humanely.⁵ There are stories of women being separated from their family members in the process and has increased chances of many being trafficked. In Jharkhand report of a woman being raped in an isolation ward also made headlines recently.

Despite the state's reassurances that there are adequate reserves of food grains, once back in villages, the threat of food insecurity for these populations is looming large. Many of these workers don't have ration card or any other proof of registration in their native panchayat so will be deprived of government relief package.

This story from Odisha is a representation of these anxieties. Dingar is originally from Khairtikra village but after his marriage, he migrated to

4. <https://in.news.yahoo.com/over-37-000-migrant-relief-122700833.html>

5. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-treat-migrants-humanely-supreme-court-tells-officials/article31216385.ece>

Mayurudan of Sonapur block under Sonapur district. He lives in a *kuchha* house with his wife and 9-year-old daughter and his widowed mother who is bedridden. Both he and his wife do agricultural wage work or undertake construction work in government or private sites. His mother, being a widow, is not a recipient of pension despite applications to Block and Panchayat officials. They only get 35 kg of rice per month for the family. Other than this wage work, they do not have any other source of livelihood. With the lockdown, they face a food shortage. His wife, Surya, does not know how they will survive this crisis in these circumstances.

Construction workers

The lockdown due to COVID-19 has affected almost all sectors of the economy but the impact on construction is most evident. The lockdown has halted all construction activity and all labour posts have been vacant consequently. In India, there are roughly 3.2 crore registered construction workers⁶ in India with an even larger number of unregistered workers and all of them are out of work right now with no certainty about when this might change.

The financial relief package announced by the Finance Minister asks States to use the welfare funds available under the Building and Other Construction Workers Act to support registered construction workers. The move, however, will only provide partial relief and reach out to a fraction of construction workers as several lakhs of these workers are not registered under the Act and would be ineligible for such relief.⁷

For example, in Uttar Pradesh, the benefits announced are said to be reaching out to 42 lakh registered workers,⁸ however the actual numbers of workers in the state are much higher, not accounting for some of the most vulnerable workers.

6. <https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/relief-to-construction-workers-18-states-transfer-rs-1000-5000-each-in-1-8-crore-beneficiary-a-cs/1921743/>

7. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/article31286921.ece>

8. <https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/relief-to-construction-workers-18-states-transfer-rs-1000-5000-each-in-1-8-crore-beneficiary-a-cs/1921743/>

Anita, 26-years old works as an unskilled daily wage worker on a construction site in Madhya Pradesh. She came to the current construction site with her husband. Both are now jobless and have no savings to tide through the lockdown and live in a make-shift shack at the construction site itself. As the work abruptly stopped, their wages have been withheld and they are not part of any registered Trade Union. The contractor they work under has asked them to vacate the site. The family has a BPL card, but it is registered in their village and with the lockdown they do not have transportation to take them back home. Some labourers from their village who were working with them have ration cards, but the nearest Ration Depot has been closed for the last 4 days. Without adequate food supplies and cash in hand, Anita and her husband are faced with an uncertain future.

Street vendors

According to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, there are one crore street vendors in India.⁹ However, only a fraction of these are registered in the Street Vendors Act 2014. The lockdown has impacted different vendors in different forms- some are finding saving grace under the 'essential list of services' such as vegetable vendors; others, who depend on selling cooked meals are out of business and so are the cycle puncture, boot-polish, and roadside tailors etc.

Ram Pyari, 53 years, sells vegetables on the roadside and at the weekly 'haat bazaar.' Her husband gets vegetables from the wholesale market and sells in different housing societies. The vegetable wholesale market is not fully functional, the wholesale rates of vegetables have become expensive. Ram Pyari fears buying a lot of vegetables which she and her husband might not be able to sell the same day. The thrice-a-week bazaar has been discontinued, which was their major source of income. Certain housing societies have banned street vendors to enter inside the premises and this has greatly affected their family income. Earlier they were easily able to earn ₹10,000-15,000 which Pyari feels might come down to ₹3000-5000 this month.

9. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/strengthening-urban-indias-informal-economy-the-case-of-street-vending/>

Santosh is from district Gonda in Uttar Pradesh and has a pani puri cart in Allahabad. There are nine members in his family, his five children, his wife and parents. Before the lockdown he used to earn a profit of ₹150 to ₹200 a day. He is not a registered street vendor but has a BPL card. He will therefore not get any form of compensation announced by the state government for street vendors. Two days before the crisis unfolded, he had taken a loan of ₹1000 and bought ration. Now with no source of income, he hopes to tide through till the end of the lockdown with that ration amount. He does not know how he can support the family if lockdown extends. He has monthly rental, utility bills and loans to pay.

Street vendors from West Bengal who sell perishable vegetables, fish, meats, fruits have reported challenges in commuting from the suburb districts to Kolkata, so have the vendors from Gujarat and Rajasthan. The supply chain of essential food items is under strain with truckers not allowed to ply, and with abattoirs shut. Thousands who were dependent on these trades are accruing debt.

Domestic workers

There are anywhere between 2 crore to 8 crore domestic workers¹⁰ in India. With the spread of COVID-19 schools and public institutions were the first to be closed. The lives of these workers were the first to be affected as most continued to work, and without childcare, they had to leave their children unattended in communities under unsafe conditions. When some housing societies and Resident Welfare Associations decided to self- quarantine, domestic workers lost their work.

The Prime Minister appealed people to give paid leaves to workers, however, several domestic workers continued to complain about being forced to work, discriminatory behaviour, lack of protective supplies like masks and hand sanitizers, and withheld wages.

Shanti, 40, is a domestic worker who lives in New Ambedkar Nagar Basti, Bhopal. She requested early payment from her employers who refused.

10. https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/areasofwork/WCMS_141187/lang--en/index.htm

Her husband is a daily wageer and works as a mason and is also out of work now. Shanti is worried about how they will make ends meet. They do not have a BPL card or any union registration.

Mithu is a domestic worker in Kolkata. She was called into work even on the day of Janta Curfew. Reena from Mayur Vihar in Delhi was asked to leave work by two of her employers without payment. Meera from Lucknow still gets calls from her employer to report to work else her loan amount will be doubled.

Waste management workers, sanitation workers and rag pickers

The situation of frontline workers providing services such as sanitation cannot be detailed without outlining already existing discriminatory practises and poor working conditions. These workers generally lack proper protective gear and safety equipment. With the COVID-19 crisis, these workers are not only exposed to the infection, but various reports of their stretched working hours are already coming in.

The dehumanizing conditions of their work have anyways impacted their health and well-being, with many subjected to diseases like respiratory tract infections, malaria, dengue, back and knee pain, hypertension and many other occupational health hazards.

Raju a safai-karmachari from Mumbai expresses that since his work involves dealing with waste, he cannot stay at home. He says that the only way people do 'social distancing' in his experience is when he states his caste. He received a mask from his supervisor which got soiled after a few shifts. He has requested another one which will take time he has been told- until then he is managing with a handkerchief.

Berukha, 35, picks up old rags, plastic, metal articles in Kolar area of Bhopal and sells them to earn her living. The lockdown has affected her work. She has not had any income since the beginning of the lockdown and is almost out of ration. She has not been provided with any safety kits by Government authorities. Her family has a BPL card and she has learnt

about the relief package to a BPL cardholder, but ration shops are either closed or out of supply.

Meenakshi, is 40 years old and from Subramaniyapuram, Madurai district. He is physically challenged and works as a sanitation worker in shops and small industries. His job includes the cleaning of drains. He is currently out of work because all the shops and industries where he was employed are shut. He was barely earning a daily wage of ₹200 per day, which is now lost.

Meenaskhi says, "Already I am a physically challenged person. At home they did not usually respect me, but by earning ₹200 per day, I was able to maintain some self-dignity and had access to some basic needs like food. Now I am suffering to get my basic requirements. Government has announced 1000 rupees for ration cardholders. This is not going to be enough to meet the needs of my joint family. I already suffer from various medical conditions including diabetes and, in these circumstances, it is difficult to have access to medicines too."

Home-based workers

India has reportedly more than three crores home-based workers¹¹ who are into industries including manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, social and personal services, hotels and restaurants. These workers are either self-employed or work contractually and sub-contractually. It is found that newly married women, women with young children and unmarried women are likely to engage in this work.

Jamila was a home-based worker in Jafradabad area of North East Delhi. In the recent violence that ravaged North East Delhi, her house was ransacked, and their belongings destroyed. She lost the raw material supplied to her by the middleman and she owes him ₹2000 for it. In a day, Jamila was earning around ₹50 for removing the thread from jeans pockets. Just as Jamila and several other families in her locality were trying to return to their lives, the lockdown started. Her contractor had promised to start giving her work from the end of March, but she has not gotten word due to the lockdown.

11. <https://scroll.in/magazine/854568/the-stories-of-the-37-4-million-invisible-and-underpaid-home-based-workers-in-india>

Most women in Ahibaranpur area do home-based work. They make baskets to carry fruit. The middleman supplies them with raw material, and they make 30 to 40 baskets in a day earning ₹60-80. Due to the lockdown, there is no raw material in the market and the middleman has told them he is not sure when the situation will become normal. These women have no formal recognition and there is no compensation plan for them. Most men in their families were working as daily wagers and are out of work.

Single women workers

The National Forum for Single Women in the country has been advocating for attention to specific issues of single women- their property and land rights, livelihood challenges etc. The case of Jyothi is a representation of the multiple vulnerabilities these women are facing in the aftermath of the outbreak.

Jyothi, 43 years old, is a widow. She is illiterate. She lives in in Madhurawada, one of the biggest slums in Vishakhapatnam. She is a domestic worker and a part-time street vendor. Her husband died 18 years ago, and she is raising 2 children one of whom is mentally challenged. After the death of her husband, she worked as a domestic worker to make both ends meet, but as time passed, she needed more money for the education of her elder son and the medical needs of her younger child. She started a small business of vegetable vending along with domestic work. As the Corona virus scare came to Vishakhapatnam, all her employers (she works in two homes as a domestic worker and gets an income of Rs 4000 a month) told her not to come to work. The employers did not tell her if they will pay her wages during the off days. She is very worried as even her elder son cannot go out to find work. Since the complete lockdown was declared, and she is not able to sell her vegetables. She has been told that she can sell vegetables from 7 am to 9 am only but she is not able to sell during this time as she is with her younger son in the morning. All of her supplies of vegetables keep getting thrown away after rotting.

Rickshaw pullers, auto drivers, taxi drivers and bus operators

The lack of commuters means that this segment of workers is without any income or wages. It is not clear how the benefit listed in the relief package will reach to the workers in this segment.

Private operators like Ola and Uber have been lobbying for short-term, interest-free loans for taxi aggregators to meet their working capital needs as well as a six-month delay to payment of certain taxes. Ola has been pushing Government to secure a 12-month “holiday” on car loan repayments to ease the pressure on drivers and set up a fund for those who have lost their daily income.

Meanwhile, for auto drivers like Arun from Bihar, wages started dropping from ₹800-300 as soon as Corona outbreak started and now with the lockdown, there is no work available. He plans to look for work at the vegetable mandi and take up head-loading for the time being. He has no information whether the mandi is functional to its full capacity or not.

Dipankar, is a 46-year-old auto-driver hailing from the Bediapara region in Kolkata. He says that he is washing his hands and trying to maintain hygiene. His family members including his wife and son are observing quarantine. He did not work on the day of Janta Curfew but later continued to work for a few hours. He is not afraid of the virus as much as he fears the drop of his income. His daily income has dropped by ₹100-150 approximately. Although as the lockdown progresses, he might see further loss of income.

Factory workers, garment workers

There are an estimated 2 crore men and 55 lakh women working in the organised public and private sector in India,¹² most of whom work in factories in the country. With the suspension of all non-essential services many workers are looking at grave insecurity. In Gurgaon, Haryana, the first to shut down were the exporters in garment factories. Most export houses get orders in bulk from European Nations like Italy, France, Spain,

12. <http://indiabudget.nic.in/es2010-11/estat1.pdf>

Belgium etc. The orders of these units started falling as COVID-19 spread to the European nations in early March.

By the time the national lockdown was announced some units were running low on profits and had already retrenched workers. There were reports of withheld wages from such units. Later in the week when Janta Curfew was announced, big manufacturers of automobiles like Maruti etc. also shut operations. While the registered workers were provided with some social safety net, a large section of workers who were sub-contracted through vendors in big factories were left in the lurch. Ram, a 39-year-old worker in loading service at one such unit, says he is 'neither covered here nor covered back home' under any benefit schemes. He is not a BPL card holder nor gets any other benefit as a factory worker. His services are considered allied to the industry and are not aided under any social security net.

The textile industry of Tirupur in Tamil Nadu is also majorly affected. Due to breaks in the supply chain of raw materials and fall in orders, the industry is looking at an estimated loss of ₹15000 crore,¹³ the impact of which will be borne most pointedly by the garment workers, many of whom are women.

Kalai Selvi is 30 years old and is a member of the Wadipatti working women's union and for the past 6 years she has been working as a cutter in a private apparel firm in Vadipatti. She earns ₹6000 per month. She is a single woman who is separated from her husband and is living with her mentally ill mother.

Despite the threat of corona virus and government order to close the companies, her factory continued to work till 26 March 2020 and ignored the grievances raised by the workers and neglected the safety of the workers. Despite this, workers like Kalai Selvi have not been promised their salaries. She recently shifted her house and had not yet transferred her ration card to the new address. In the given situation, she and her family will be deprived of the state benefit linked to their ration card.

13. <https://www.thelede.in/tamil-nadu/2020/03/26/tirupur-textile-industry-stares-at-rs-15000-crore-loss-due-to-covid-19>

Arun is 45 years old and works at a biscuit factory in Karnataka. He reported that his employer is not providing any safety measures required for the workers. They were threatened by non-payment of wages if they avoided work. In that factory, there are only two toilets and around 50 workers share this. So far, there is no provision of a sanitizer at the factory. He is not attending work and hopes to go back home as lockdown lifts.

With the national lockdown date nearing, there is push from the textile industry to allow re-opening of the sector in partial ways and with staggered shifts. While, this might be a welcome step for at least some workers to regain employment, what one fears is whether those inducted back will be pushed to work over-time to make up for the economic loss the sector has faced in this period.

Accredited social health activists, auxiliary nurse midwife and other frontline health workers

When school and public institutions were closed by various state governments, the mid-day meal distribution and ICDS centres were closed. Kerala became the first state to order delivery of dry ration to the families of these children. The Governments of Delhi NCT, Tripura and other states also followed suit. The Supreme Court also took suo moto cognizance and ordered the states to ensure uniformity in distribution.

There are at present 208,000 Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANMs), 1.2 million anganwadi workers (AWW) and 857,000 Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA)¹⁴ workers in India. These low paid workers are the veins of our public health system. For long, experts have opined that this system needs to be strengthened and adequately resourced.

With the COVID-19 crisis, these workers have been overloaded with tasks like distribution of dry ration at doorstep, acting as 'community watch on transmission', addressing issues of pregnant and lactating mothers in communities, and conducting surveys to help in mitigation planning. These

14. <https://www.chwcentral.org/blog/indias-auxiliary-nurse-midwife-anganwadi-worker-accredited-social-health-activist-multipurpose>

women with little knowledge, training and remuneration are the frontlines to contain the spread

In states like Andhra Pradesh, the ANM and ASHA workers have been instructed to visit houses and take details of any person who might have met any foreign returnee or are having any symptoms of the virus. If they come across any suspected case, they have been asked to immediately alert the medical teams and keep them in isolation. There is no clarity on training being done of such workers for handling exposure to COVID-19 patients. With low salaries, basic gears and scant information these women are our foot soldiers in the fight against COVID-19.

In some states such as Delhi and Haryana, several ASHA and ANMs are demanding safety gears before initiating distribution of meals and conduct of the surveys. There is no clarity whether these workers have been accounted under the 50lakh insurance cover promised by the Finance Minister in relief package or not.

Salon workers

Khusboo hails from Shillong, Meghalaya. She worked in a salon as a beautician. Khusboo also doubled up for work late in the evening through the e-commerce website Urban Clap. She was earning close to ₹20,000 a month and is recently married. Her husband is also in the grooming industry.

The lockdown finds the couple in a tight spot not only because they have no work and social security to sail through, but also because they have been subjected to racism in the present context. Khusboo shares that earlier, women in her locality would request her services, but now their children 'call names' and hide from balconies. The ostracization has been a lot more painful than the economic hardship.

Newspaper vendors

Several housing societies across metro cities came up with their quarantine guidelines much before the lockdown was announced. The rules barred entry of any kind of vendor or delivery personnel. Designated spots were

agreed for pick up and drop. As these newer arrangements were being set up, rumours of virus remaining active on surfaces like newspapers became rife.

Kishan is a vendor in a housing society of Noida and he complains about the rude behaviour by residents during delivery time. He says, 'they behave as if I will give them the infection'. The impact was such that WHO had to step in and make an announcement that there is no evidence of surface transmission through paper. Many newspapers also ran articles detailing that it is safe to read newspapers.

While the economic impact in the drop of circulation is yet to be computed, it is the newspaper vendors, again the last in the distribution chain, earning meagre profits, to get the hit the hardest.

Most marginalised groups

The differential impact of COVID-19 on most marginalised communities and groups such as women, children, transgenders, sex workers, beggars, disabled persons, people in institutional care, critically ill persons, persons suffering from HIV and AIDS is surfacing. There are reports from these communities on lack of essential services such as medicine, nutritious food, delay in check-ups due to OPD closure in hospitals, discrimination and neglect during relief distribution. Many community members are not registered in any worker association and don't have BPL card or JanDhan account.

2

Helping informal workers cope with the COVID-19 crisis

At this time of crisis, it is imperative for us to urgently come together and respond to the needs of the affected communities. As ActionAid Association, we are putting all our efforts into bringing immediate relief and succour to the people who have been worst affected through cooked food, dry rations, sanitation materials and counselling support. We have also been providing support to governments through grounded policy inputs from the perspective of workers and vulnerable communities. We have been spreading awareness on sanitation and protection to community members and staff and volunteers who are responding.

Our grassroots-based allied organisations are working with the local administration in villages to reach out to returning migrants and counsel them on the need to maintain quarantine, set up community-based quarantine facilities, and ensure supply of cooked food as they maintain quarantine.

Based on our continued engagement with informal workers in almost 160 districts (in both urban and rural dimensions) across the country and our grounded observations, we recommend the following steps to Government to provide much needed support to informal workers: -

Workers at quarantine shelters

- » Many workers left work without taking payment or their payment of wages was withheld by employers. Some have even reported being given bank cheques which they have been unable to encash. A Help Desk should be set up at the shelter to take adequate steps and ensure that payment of wages to these workers is done.
- » Many families have separated during the mass migrant movement. Authorities must undertake coordinated efforts to reunite workers with their families.

- » Any loans taken by migrant workers for travel and contingency purpose during this period should be waived off. In case the loans have been taken from private agents or employers, a directive should be issued to them to waive it off and the state should devise a method of compensating them.
- » Most vulnerable people such as old aged, single women, disabled women, pregnant women, women with young children should be identified at the shelters and given required services such as pre-natal and anti-natal healthcare and immunisation on priority.
- » Awareness sessions on COVID-19 should be organised at transit locations. The centres should also provide IEC material and information to workers on precautions, treatment etc. and on the state and centre supported benefits that they are entitled to.
- » The help desk at the centres should also register cases of violence and abuse faced by workers during the transit period.
- » Due to the situation of sudden distress and movement many need psychological support and counselling, these facilities should be set up in transit locations.
- » The centres should be equipped with facilities like clean and separate men and women toilets and safe drinking water.
- » Joyful learning spaces for children should be created at these sites.
- » Adequate and dignified transport services should be arranged for travel of these workers to native villages after the quarantine period ends.

Protection for workers who have returned to their village

- » In case any worker is diagnosed with COVID-19, an adequate facility should be identified for isolation and the family members should be informed. Efforts should be done that the worker can communicate with family members using electronic means.
- » Panchayat authorities in villages such as Pradhans and block officials should be directed to take adequate steps and ensure that the workers

returning home do not face any kind of discrimination or ostracization at the community level.

- » Panchayat level feeding centres or community kitchens should be set up in rural areas where these migrant workers are going back.
- » Panchayats could be roped in for the transfer of the relief amount to families who are unable to access it at the quarantine shelters or due to the lack of bank accounts.
- » Some migrant workers might not have panchayat registration or BPL card as they may have been living in cities for a long time. Suitable information on how they can access their entitlements under the Government's relief package should be provided at the panchayat level.
- » Government should initiate a campaign against domestic violence and exhorting men to support women in care work and other household work. They should advertise domestic violence helpline numbers on TV/radio/SMS and WhatsApp and induct more volunteers to run the helpline. Village-based One-stop crisis centre should be set up in empty panchayat bhawans or community halls as emergency shelter options.
- » Pregnant and lactating women migrant workers may not be registered with ICDS centres in the source state. The ASHA/ANMs should be directed to take note of such cases and ensure that they receive adequate care and their children may access facilities like immunisation and mid-day meals.
- » Special measures need to be put in place for child protection. Many vulnerable boys and girls face the risk of neglect, violence, abuse and may end up as victims of child labour, child abuse, child trafficking and child marriage. Thus, the members in the Integrated Child Protection System structure should be vigilant and carry out special safety drives.
- » Special helplines for children should be set up or the service of ChildLine should be expanded to all types of distress calls regarding children.
- » The panchayat must facilitate job cards for migrant workers under MNREGA so they can get immediate employment when work resumes.
- » There is a dire need to have a process in place in the source states to

register migrant workers, especially women workers, so that they do not fall prey to the hands of traffickers.

- » As and when these workers desire to go back to their place of employment, there should be a process of registration and linking back to the employer in destination states to avoid them having to pay middlemen for getting their jobs back.
- » Government should also put in place mechanisms to ensure that women workers are not discriminated and harassed in the process of regaining their employment or starting afresh at a new workplace.

Income and livelihood support for workers

- » Government has announced direct cash transfers to several sections such as MNREGA workers and farmers. But there are many informal workers such as daily wage earners, home-based workers, and domestic workers, who are not covered under the schemes mentioned in the Government's relief package as they are not registered with any department. Therefore, Government needs to work in conjunction with trade unions, informal workers' collectives and civil society organisations to ensure that all informal workers associated or registered with them receive the relief amount. We recommend an amount of ₹10680 or the monthly minimum wage, whichever is higher, for the next three months, applicable from March itself.
- » There are many workers who would still be excluded as they are not registered with trade unions and workers' collectives. Therefore, Government should transfer an amount of ₹10680 or the monthly minimum wage, whichever is higher, to all below poverty line (BPL), above poverty line (APL) and Antodaya card holders, Jan Dhan account holders, and beneficiaries of the PM KISAN yojana for the next three months, applicable from March.
- » For people who may not have bank accounts or addresses and other details, including homeless people and daily wage labourers, Government needs to regularly reach out to them with relief packages. This should include the relief amount of ₹10680 in cash and dry ration, medicines, soaps and sanitizers. State governments should arrange to provide this relief package at feeding centres and shelters.

- » Platform workers who may be engaged as drivers, delivery persons, beauticians, plumbers, painters, in security etc. are extremely vulnerable as they are not recognised as employees and are thus not entitled to monthly wages, social security, and health benefits. Government needs to issue a notice to platform owners to ensure financial assistance equal to the average monthly earnings of their service providers plus fifty percent of the average earnings for the next three months. The platform owners must also provide all protective gears to their registered service providers.
- » While the daily wage for MNREGA workers has been increased, Government needs to clear the backlog of payments. Since the Finance Minister has said that MNREGA work can continue wherever possible with due precautions such as social distancing, Government should ensure availability of work and remove the cap of 100 days and like in particular instances in the past make it at least 150 days. Workers should be included in the efforts against COVID-19 such as upgrading infrastructure of primary health centres and district hospitals, running community kitchens and providing door-to-door delivery of food to households with quarantined members or households with vulnerable people, ensuring availability of soap, hand sanitisers, and water at the household level to maintain hygiene levels, distributing masks and other protective items, and leading community awareness initiatives, collecting test samples from households so that corona suspect people do not have to visit hospitals etc. Government must also introduce an urban employment guarantee programme on the same lines.
- » Government should waive off institutional loans for all farmers and agricultural labour. Since many such families borrow through informal mechanisms such as moneylenders, neighbours and other family members, Government must also set up a mechanism to help them restructure their loans and provide monetary support to help them pay the loans off.
- » Keeping in view that the impact of the current situation will be felt for many months, Government should work out a rural-urban stimulus package of at least six months for Small and Medium Enterprises, cooperatives, self-help groups, and small units. This could include upfront start-up grants, tax breaks, interest subventions, and loans at zero/near-zero interest. These steps are important as in the long run,

livelihoods of these informal labour, particularly migrant populations, are dependent on the functionality and growth of such units.

- » To contain further migration of workers in coming months, there should be a complete moratorium/ban on retrenchments for the next six months and state needs to issue an urgent notice to all employers in small, medium, and large enterprises and service provisioning to retain their staff and continue paying them, including casual and contractual workers. Government must also set up a fund to provide payroll support to owners of the enterprises conditional to retaining their employees. All employers must also ensure adequate protective gear for their workers including masks, hand sanitizers, gloves etc.

Long-term interventions for migrant workers

India has an estimated population of 14 crore migrant workers.¹⁵ Many of them are from agricultural families with dwindling incomes. With the decline in rural industries and widespread loss of forests and land, there has been an absolute decline in employment in rural areas. People are thus forced to migrate to find work in the informal sector in cities, often seasonally or temporarily. The highest proportion of people in this so-called migrant working class are from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, exposing how dispossession and marginalisation is reproduced along caste and ethnic hierarchies.

Despite the role migrant workers play in building and sustaining our cities, they are all too easily ignored in policymaking. We are currently witnessing the elite bias in the way in which the lockdown has been planned and implemented.

The disruption caused by the pandemic could last for months and its effects will reverberate for years to come. Our interventions for the marginalised and the vulnerable cannot be determined by the extent that they benefit the rich and upper middle classes. We must seize this moment to tackle the structural issues which act to deny migrant workers their political identity and agency and allow them to exist only in the periphery of our consciousness.

14. Census 2011 estimate

- » Government needs to first and foremost ensure a decent living wage for all workers. The existing prescribed minimum wages in many states and the proposed floor wage at the national level are too little to be of consequence to significant improvements in the conditions of workers.
- » Government needs to overhaul its framework for the valuation of labour. The skill classification system which is integral to wage determination for different sectors is too outdated and uneven across states. It continues to reflect our biases towards certain kinds of work and the people who are engaged in them. For example, women workers are often engaged in work which is categorised as unskilled work, be it in agriculture, fisheries, or construction. Moreover, several forms of work which are categorised by a higher participation of women such as domestic work and home-based work, are largely excluded from such classification.
- » It is also necessary to ensure safe working conditions for workers, including safety in transit for migrant workers. All categories of workers, particularly migrant workers and other contract workers must be covered by labour legislation such as the proposed Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code and Social Security Code. They should also have access to implementation mechanisms such as local committees under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013.
- » Government should push for setting up of Migration Facilitation Centres in all districts. They can play a pivotal role in maintaining a database of migrant workers both at source and destination, providing information about and accessibility to welfare schemes and legislative protections, and ensuring access to grievance redressal mechanisms.
- » Migrant workers should be provided access to their entitlements such as food rations, maternity benefits, subsidised cooking fuel, and health insurance among others, regardless of their location. This would entail better documentation of workers, linkages with bank accounts, and accepting Aadhar cards, BPL cards, and other forms of government issued identification for authentication, instead of putting workers through tortuous processes such as biometric identification. It is imperative that workers have access to education, healthcare, water, and sanitation wherever they are based, including remote work sites.

Government must utilise money from labour welfare funds and education cess, sanitation cess etc. for this purpose.

- » Several low-income workers, especially migrant workers, are left out of existing housing schemes due to the insistence on proving long-term residency. There is a need to make more housing units available and enable in-situ slum redevelopment to the benefit of workers. The focus should be on low-cost rental housing and dormitory accommodation with basic amenities such as water, sanitation, and electricity for migrant workers. Such housing should be based on considerations of distance from the workplace, assurance of basic amenities, and security of tenure.
- » Government must also endeavour to arrest distress migration. This requires ensuring access of agricultural families to land, forests, and water. The long pending land reform agenda needs to be put back firmly on the table, with a focus on land ownership to the tiller. Other forms of support such as income support, remunerative prices, crop insurance, and higher investment in irrigation must follow.
- » Government also needs to expand rural employment guarantee. In recent years, the demand for work under MNRGA has outstripped the provision of work, wages have remained almost stagnant, and are running into backlog of several months in many states. Yet, it has been effectively used to reduce seasonal migration and ensure income security, particularly in situations of drought.
- » Governments should set up interstate coordination committees to monitor work and living conditions of migrant workers and facilitate greater convergence among various ministries such as labour, women and child development, and health and family welfare. They could also set up a Task Force on Migration with representatives from different departments, worker facilitation centres, NGOs, trade unions, and informal workers' networks in order to better inform migration policy and its implementation.
- » It is critical to enable workers to collectivise and organise through unions and workers' collectives. These spaces not only serve as safety and solidarity nets, they also act to make workers visible and their voices heard.

act:onaid

www.actionaidindia.org

  @actionaidindia

 @actionaid_india

 @actionaidcomms

ActionAid Association,
R - 7, Hauz Khas Enclave,
New Delhi - 110016

 +9111-11-4064 0500

