



Domestic Workers' Access to Secure Livelihoods in West Bengal

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Executive Summary

Hundreds of thousands of women from poor communities work as domestic workers in Kolkata. Domestic work is typically a precarious occupation, with very little recognition in legislation or policy. Along with other workers in the informal economy, women domestic workers (WDWs) were severely impacted by the national lockdown enforced in March, with loss of livelihood and few options for survival.

Parichiti works with WDWs in 20 different locations – slums and informal settlements in Kolkata and villages in south 24 Parganas. We conducted this pilot study from late June to August 2020 to document the situation of WDWs from March onwards, in the lockdown and the initial stages of lifting of restrictions. We interviewed 14 WDWs on the phone to record their experiences during the lockdown and after, including impact on livelihoods. The objectives of the study were to document the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of WDWs, with focus on economic and health dimensions.

We found that most domestic workers in our sample were paid for March, but faced difficulties in procuring wages April onwards. During this period, they faced economic hardships that threatened their survival, with members of their family also involved in the informal sector and experiencing loss of wages. Workers survived on relief received through civil society or by taking loans from banks or informal lenders. Some are now stuck in a debt trap.

Most went back to work from June, but faced several barriers – public transport services continued to be dysfunctional, apartment complexes prohibited entry of outsiders, and employers were reluctant to allow workers into their homes. Employers were wary of workers if they were employed in multiple households or used public transport, forcing workers to adapt to these conditions. Due to these reasons, some workers lost their jobs permanently, while others returned with lower wages or lower number of employers. Workers were well aware of the precautions to be taken at the home and workplace with regards to Covid-19.

Many WDWs were unable to access ration through the Public Distribution System. Some were not enrolled and others were enrolled in the districts they had migrated from. Some were not classified as below the poverty line and were hence not priority households for the state, although they were 'deserving' beneficiaries. All of the respondents were affected by Cyclone Amphan, which devastated parts of the state in May 2020. Despite the announcement of a sizeable compensation by the state, those whose homes were impacted were unable to get any relief. WDWs overall tended to not rely on the state for welfare or health services. Many regarded public health systems to have poor quality services, and turned to private services when possible. Both central and state governments fell short of meeting the needs of WDWs during the pandemic, which could potentially have long-term impact on their income and health.

Introduction

India's first Covid-19 infection was reported in Thrissur, Kerala on January 30.¹ After two more cases were detected in February, the government of Kerala declared a state emergency.² However, this didn't provoke much awareness or preparedness in the rest of the country. Nearly 50 days after the first case, with over 300 reported cases of Covid-19 in the country, the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, called for the nation to observe 'Janata Curfew' (translation: People's Curfew) on Sunday, 22 March.³ The Janata Curfew was a 14-hour 'voluntary' curfew, with exceptions for people providing "essential" and "emergency" services such as law enforcement, health care and even food delivery. Two days later in the evening of 24 March, 2020, a stringent 21-day nationwide lockdown was announced. It was to commence from the midnight of March 24 itself. The national lockdown was extended several times, through mid-May, with new guidelines following each extension. Since then, there have been phased relaxations with most economic activity having been given permission to commence with some safeguards.

The Government of India announced a Rs 1.7-lakh-crore relief package to take care of poor, workers and those who needed immediate help amid a lockdown to combat the coronavirus pandemic.⁴ The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana to cover 80 crore poor people included direct cash transfers and food security, targeting groups such as farmers, workers under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), beneficiaries of widow pensions, people with disabilities, and women with Jan Dhan accounts, among others.

The Government of West Bengal (GoWB) announced a scheme called Sneher Paras (Touch of Affection) for migrant workers, which offered an ex-gratia payment of INR 1000 for workers from West Bengal who were stranded in other parts of the country.⁵ On 26 March 2020, the GoWB also announced special package entitlements free of cost from 1st April till September 30, 2020.⁶ Gol had announced that free rations will be provided under the National Food Security Act to Rajya Khadya Suraksha Yojana beneficiaries, Priority Households and Antyodaya Anna Yojana households till November 30, 2020. The GoWB extended this additional PDS allocation to June 2021.

¹ Bindu Shajan Perappadan (January 30, 2020), 'India's first coronavirus infection confirmed in Kerala', The Hindu, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indias-first-coronavirus-infection-confirmed-in-kerala/article30691004.ece>

² Onmanorama staff, (February 04, 2020), 'Kerala govt declares coronavirus outbreak a state calamity', Onmanorama, <https://www.onmanorama.com/news/kerala/2020/02/03/coronavirus-kerala-state-emergency.html>

³ 'COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in India: Janta Curfew', Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_lockdown_in_India#Janata_Curfew

⁴ Nukunj Ohri, (March 26, 2020), '10 Government Measures To Help Poor Through Lockdown', Bloomberg Quint, <https://www.bloombergquint.com/economy-finance/10-government-measures-to-help-poor-through-lockdown>

⁵ Department of Disaster Management and Civil Defence, Government of West Bengal, Notification No. 106-PSDM&CD/2020, 20 April, 2020 <http://wbmdm.gov.in/writereaddata/NW664962.pdf>

⁶ Food and Supplies Department, Government of West Bengal, Notification, Memo No. 1205-FS/Sectt./Food/14R-01/2013 (Pt. III), 26 March, 2020, https://prsindia.org/files/covid19/notifications/1149.WB_PDS_Entitlement_March_26.pdf

Workers' Rights & the Lockdown

The Government of India's lack of planning and foresight, especially regarding the issues of migrant and informal sector workers, was evident in the abrupt way in which the lockdown was announced. Migrant workers across the country found themselves out of jobs and cut off from their homes and networks of support. Stranded without work, money and transport, thousands of workers across the country traversed hundreds of kilometres or more, on foot, trying to go back home.⁷ However, it was not only migrant workers who found themselves in a precarious situation during the lockdown. Most informal sector workers were badly affected. Conservatively, more than 80% of India's employed people work in the informal sector.⁸ Workers in the informal sector do not have meaningful access to labour protection or social security.

Hundreds of thousands of women from poor communities work as domestic workers in Kolkata. Parichiti works with women domestic workers (WDWs) in 20 different locations, including slums and informal settlements in Kolkata and villages in south 24 Parganas. There is no data on the exact number of domestic workers in India. The estimates vary from 4.75 million (NSS 2005) to over 90 million according to different sources. It can be safely estimated that they number over 50 million in the country.⁹ Most of them are women and girls. WDWs from south 24 Parganas usually commute to Kolkata by suburban trains (known as local trains) or buses from their villages. WDWs who live in Kolkata either walk to work or commute by public transport like buses, or private transport such as rickshaws and auto rickshaws.

The domestic work sector is heterogenous with many different employment arrangements. Despite the prevalence of domestic work in the country, there is no comprehensive legislation

for domestic workers in India. However, years of struggle have resulted in some gains, and have led to piecemeal recognition of domestic work in India. Some protections are extended to domestic workers through their inclusions in the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act (2008) and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. However, the implementation of these legislations vis-à-vis domestic workers remains largely absent.¹⁰

Domestic workers were unable to go to work or earn an income during the lockdown. Starting with the national lockdowns, and continuing after, many households and apartment buildings prohibited the entry of 'outsiders', which primarily included informal sector workers such as delivery persons, mechanics, vendors and domestic workers. The state, which does not recognise WDWs as 'workers' said that 'domestic help' would be permitted to go back to work but residents' associations/ residents could decide whether they would be allowed in.

Many women domestic workers in West Bengal permanently lost their jobs, with other members of the family also facing unemployment as informal sector workers. Even after strict restrictions were lifted, thousands of women have been unable to travel to work even as late as November 2020 as suburban or local train services were yet to resume in West Bengal. Consequently, most of these women have not been able to resume work and have lost their jobs.

Our interviews with 14 WDWs presents an account of their experiences of the lockdown, the kind of support they got from the state, community and their employers, and their experiences of the workplace once they resumed work.

⁷ (22 April, 2020), 'In Pictures: The long road home for India's migrant workers', Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2020/4/22/in-pictures-the-long-road-home-for-indias-migrant-workers/>

⁸ The Wire Staff, (04 May, 2018), 'Nearly 81% of the Employed in India Are in the Informal Sector: ILO', The Wire, <https://thewire.in/labour/nearly-81-of-the-employed-in-india-are-in-the-informal-sector-ilo>

⁹ Kalpana Viswanath, (27 May, 2020), 'It Is Time to Stop Seeing Domestic Workers as COVID-19 'Carriers'', The Wire, <https://thewire.in/labour/covid-19-lockdown-domestic-workers>

¹⁰ See Reuters, (15 October, 2020), 'Indian women in informal sector 'learn to ignore' sexual abuse at work', The Hindu, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indian-women-in-informal-sector-learn-to-ignore-sexual-abuse-at-work/article32859977.ece; https://www.theleaflet.in/situation-of-domestic-workers-in-india-what-needs-to-change/#>

About this Study

From early May, Parichiti received reports that many WDWs were not paid their wages for April. Large numbers of WDWs did not go to work in April because of the lockdown or because their employers asked them to stay away from work.

During our telephone conversations with WDWs in May, we began encouraging them to ask their employers for payment for April and explain that they were not staying away from work of their own volition; these were unusual circumstances and they deserved to be paid. Initially, most WDWs expressed reservations about this course of action because they were afraid of losing their jobs. However, some did ask employers to pay them for April and even May.

From Parichiti, we conducted this pilot study to document the situation of WDWs in the lockdown and the initial stages of the lifting of restrictions. We interviewed 14 WDWs to record their experiences. All the women interviewed were live-out workers, that is, they live in their own homes and go to their employers' homes to work. The interviews were conducted telephonically from late June to August 2020 as the pandemic made face-to-face interactions difficult. Twelve of the 14 women interviewed reside in communities where Parichiti works and are members of Samadhan Dal¹¹ (translation: group for solutions), which are collectives of WDWs promoted by Parichiti.

Of the 14 WDWs we interviewed, 3 WDWs were daily commuters from south 24 Parganas while 11 live and work in Kolkata.

The objectives of the study were to

- a) document the situation of WDWs during the lockdown including the relief available to them, and
- b) understand the changes in the lives of WDWs during the pandemic, including short and long-term impact on their livelihood and health.

¹¹ Samadhan Dal are groups of women domestic workers in the localities where they live. Membership of Samadhan Dal is open to women of 18 years and above who work as domestic workers. The Samadhan Dal is a space for WDWs to come together, discuss issues relevant to their lives and work and strategise and take action. Each Samadhan Dal decides its own agenda and their discussions and actions encompass their lives as WDWs, their lives as women and also as members of their community.

FINDINGS

Uncertainties of Work & Wages

LOSS OF JOBS & WAGES

Domestic work is a poorly paid job. Although most employers will admit that domestic workers are necessary to keep their homes running smoothly, they are reluctant to increase wages. As a result, live-out domestic workers usually have multiple workplaces and employers. All the WDWs we interviewed, too, worked in multiple houses till March. Since the easing of the lockdown restrictions, many of them have had to contend with drastic reductions in livelihood.

Ranu Shaw worked in 6 houses before the lockdown. She resumed work in June but now works for 3 houses. Similarly, Shonkori Mondol was employed by 7 households, and has been able to retain only 4 of them. Ujjwala Haldar was employed by 2 households, and now works in only one.

Mithu Mondol had 4 jobs before the lockdown and she earned 7,200 INR every month. All the jobs were in houses in a gated community that had prohibited the entry of 'outsiders', including domestic workers, from the imposition of the lockdown in late March, through early June. All her employers paid her full wages for March. Three of her employers were unwilling to pay her full wages for April but they paid part wages after she asked. Only 1 employer, in whose house she works for half an hour everyday and gets 700 INR per month had paid her in full and had re-employed her. "I asked them how they expected me to manage if they didn't pay me for April. They said that since I hadn't worked in April they could only pay part wages. I requested that they pay me full wages for April and then I wouldn't ask for payment for May. After all, I do work for them twelve months of the year. They advised me to look for new jobs. I told them that if my old employers were not calling me back was it likely that I would get new jobs? Anyway, I asked them and got their response. How many times can I ask? I have my self-respect too."

The 14 women interviewed for this study said that they were all paid their wages for March. All but one had worked for three weeks in March. They had stopped going to work from the day of the Janata Curfew. However, challenges due to the abruptness of the stringent lockdown persisted until much longer. Bina Dhara of Sonarpur faced a particularly difficult time,

**"My mother-in-law died on February 29, in Bashonti, which is where my in-laws stay. We returned to Sonarpur on March 18, after completing all the rituals, and then the lockdown started from March 22. We faced many problems as I could not go and collect my monthly salary."
- Bina Dhara**

It was only in June that Bina was able to visit her employers to collect her wages for the month of March. She had not been able to resume work in the interim because train services were suspended, and travelling by bus continues to be too expensive for her.

For all the WDWs we interviewed, the loss of jobs naturally resulted in reduced income. The WDWs, despite their multiple jobs, were earning less than 10,000 INR per month before the lockdown and struggling to make ends meet.

While the women interviewed for this study were paid their wages for March, anxiety about their wages during the lockdown persisted for several months. Worsening this anxiety was the ad hoc manner in which employers across the city were determining the payment of wages for domestic workers, as is characteristic of domestic work arrangements. Some employers paid full wages for the months they couldn't go to work, some paid part wages and some didn't pay anything at all.

Most domestic workers are paid in cash by their employers. However, this was a challenge as mobility and interpersonal interaction was limited during the lockdown period. A few WDWs, who had a bank account, reported that employers transferred their wages electronically.

Shonkori Mondol explained that all her 7 employers paid her wages for March and April. She had not gone to work from the last week of March to the end of April. In May, 3 of her employers said that they would no longer employ her. "One of my employers said that their business was going through bad times so they couldn't continue to employ me," she said. Another employer, who is a single man, had gone away from the city and was not sure when he would return. Another household, where there is a child and an elderly woman in the family, said that they would not allow anyone to enter their house during the pandemic. She has retained 4 of her earlier 7 jobs. "I made sure that my employers paid my back wages before I rejoined work. One family, however, is yet to pay for 1 month. I am still working for them."

Monju Haldar had been working in 7 households for 1-1.5 years. She lives in Sonarpur and goes to work on her bicycle. She was called back by 3 of her employers. However, none of her employers paid her the wages for April and May. One employer paid her Rs 500 which is one-third of her monthly wage.

"One house is completely new. I joined there from March 1st and then we went into lockdown from March 22nd. They paid me for March but didn't pay for the lockdown period. They said that since I was completely new that would be difficult. I am working there now."
- Monju Haldar

Lakshmi Haldar used to work in 5 households before the lockdown. She has retained two of those jobs. One of the employers pays her Rs 1400 per month like she was paid before. Another employer has reduced her salary from Rs 1500 to Rs 1200 because she no longer works two shifts a day. Ujjwala Haldar's employers don't want to employ multiple workers and so have increased her task load and consequently, her pay from Rs 2000 per month to Rs 3000.

In some, although rare, instances, employers appreciated the challenges that domestic workers they had employed were facing. Bina Dhara had taken a loan of Rs 20,000 from one of her employers before the lockdown to meet the expenses associated with the death rituals of her mother-in-law. "I usually repay loans by adjusting against my wages. However, when I went to meet this family in June they gave me another Rs 2000 because they realised I was having difficulties. They have been very considerate about the loan."

RESUMING WORK

Most WDWs we interviewed resumed work from June though some were able to work from May. Lakshmi Halder said that she went back to work from May 18. Shonkori Mondol went back to work from May 3. All the women interviewed work for more than 1 household. Ranu Shaw resumed work in June. Monju Haldar and Mithu Mondol explained that they were able to resume work only from June 8 because before that the housing complexes where they worked were not allowing any outsiders in.

There was a break in communication with employers when the women were not going to work. Their employers either did not answer their calls or hurriedly hung up after exchanging greetings. "I went to the building where I work. I called my employer from the intercom at the reception. Her daughter answered the phone and said her mother was not home." Mithu Mondol

Ranu Shaw said that she had been regularly calling some of her employers about rejoining work.

"This particular family pays me Rs 1500 every month. They haven't called since the lockdown. Out of desperation, I called them asking when I could resume work. They kept giving me dates and then changing their minds. They also paid me Rs 1000 and so, I can't even look for a new job."
- Ranu Shaw

Interestingly, while employers' household complexes were already prohibiting the entry of outsiders, low-income communities where some of the WDWs we interviewed reside imposed restrictions on their mobility and also stopped others from coming in. Ranu Shaw was unable to go to work from April because of this. Some low income neighbourhoods in Kolkata had put restrictions in place to keep coronavirus away.

Changes in Work Conditions

COMMUTE

Commuting is an important consideration for live-out domestic workers. Many daily commuters, come to the city by train from villages which are comparatively close to the city. Even within the city, women travel by bus or auto rickshaws and many simply walk to work. Most WDWs who live in Kolkata prefer to take jobs close to where they live so that they can walk to work and save money on transport. Once restrictions eased, women who walk to work found it easier to go back. Employers felt that it was safer to allow in workers who were not risking exposure to Covid-19 on buses or other modes of public transport. Lakshmi Halder said that her employers told her not to use public transport. However, taking an auto regularly would cost Rs 600 every month and that is not something she can afford. Ranu Pramanik lost one of her jobs because her employers hired someone who lives locally. They called her after one and a half months of the lockdown and said that they had employed someone else in her place. They were wary of allowing in someone who would be traveling by public transport. Mithu Mondol doesn't use public transport but travels to work on her bicycle. Yet, that did not seem to influence the decision that some of her employers took about not calling her back to work.

Shonkori Mondol said that she might not go back to using public transport even after the situation is better. She used to travel to work by train. Since trains were not running, she decided to use her bicycle to go to work. "Initially, the one hour cycle ride was hard work. Now I feel this gives me more flexibility and I don't have to worry about missing the train. Even when the trains resume service, I will travel by cycle. I have also bought a raincoat."

PRECAUTIONS AT THE WORKPLACE

Returning to work after the lockdown meant that precautions had to be observed in the workplace. All our interviewees were aware of the precautions required to be maintained in light of Covid-19. Our interviewees explained that they were already observing precautions like washing hands, distancing and wearing masks at home. And they were observing precautions in their workplace too. "Yes, it's important to wear a mask. It keeps me alert and reminds me that I can't afford to ignore precautions," said Ranu Shaw.

Already regarded as 'outsiders', for some WDWs the added layer of surveillance and checks in response to Covid-19 were expected. Shonkori Mondol explained that in the 'bank quarters', a housing complex for bank officers where she works, they check their temperature at the gate and also spray hand sanitizer for them to 'wash' their hands before they enter. After reaching her employer's flat she again washes her hands with antibacterial soap. She also said that she carries a bottle of sanitizer in her bag so that it's always handy because she realises the importance of sanitizing her hands.

"I change my clothes in each employer's house. I wear a mask and wash my hands well with soap before I begin work. Once I get home, I have a bath and change my clothes. We are taking all precautions at home too," said Nomita Majhi who works in 4 households.

Lakshmi Haldar mentioned an experience that was hurtful. She has been asked not to touch the child of her employers. Since she has been working for that household for three years, she found this request upsetting. In fact, once when she touched the child, she was asked to wash the child's hands with a medicated soap. She is also disturbed that her employers clean anything that she touches although she begins work only after washing her hands.

Our interviewees also stated that they also observed precautions at home for their own health and that of their families. Many of them said that they are not very clear how the virus spreads but they knew that the safety measures must not be ignored. "I only know that those who are going out may come back with it and going near them may affect me too but I don't know exactly how it spreads. This is why people have not asked us to go back to work. So, we are not going out much and not really meeting anyone," said Bina Dhara.

Mithu Mondol said that she knows that the virus is called coronavirus and one gets a terrible disease if infected. "It's spread through saliva so it's important to wear masks. We also shouldn't be touching our face and eyes," she added.

Social Security & Welfare Access

Historically, workers in India's informal economy have had very limited or no state-sponsored social security provision. Together with the lack of any work security and an underfunded public health system, informal sector workers were doubly affected by the pandemic and government responses to it. WDWs had to dip into their savings, and/or take loans from relatives or employers to compensate for the loss of income and ensure the survival of their families through the months of the lockdown. Ujjwala Halder had used the money she and her husband had saved for her daughter's wedding. Their daughter is nineteen and they had wanted to get her married this year. They feel that will not be possible now.

Ranu Shaw borrowed Rs 5000 from her brother-in-law during the lockdown. She also borrowed Rs 3000 from another acquaintance. Her house was destroyed during Cyclone Amphan which struck West Bengal in May and she borrowed Rs 10,000 from a neighbour to buy bamboo sticks and tarpaulin to rebuild her house.

Ranu Pramanik has to repay a bank loan for Rs 1.5 lakhs. The loan was to buy cooking vessels and other equipment for her husband's business. Ranu's husband works as a cook for parties and gatherings. The loan collectors come weekly and she has to pay them Rs 3200 per week. Her income, as well as that of her husband and son, has gone down and therefore, repaying the loan is now a big source of anxiety.

Access to Food Security Programmes

Loss of personal income and family income created insecurity and anxiety amongst the WDWs. Meeting their daily expenses became a challenge during the lockdown. On March 26, the West Bengal government had announced a decision to make foodgrain (rice and wheat/fortified atta) available free of cost for 6 months for beneficiaries under various food subsidy schemes in the state.¹² However, WDWs we interviewed experienced challenges in accessing these entitlements. They got rice from the PDS. In April, those with non-priority ration cards had to buy rice from the PDS at Rs 13 per kg. From May, some got rice from the PDS for free. There was also dissatisfaction amongst WDWs whose families were not categorised as Below the Poverty Line (BPL), and were hence not priority households. They said that well-off people get categorised as BPL whereas poor people are marked Above Poverty the Line and consequently, deprived of benefits. After the National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA) households are categorised as Priority Household (PHH) and Non-priority Household (NPHH).¹³ The households fulfilling the eligibility criteria are known as Priority Household Ration Card holders. The others have Non-priority Household Ration card.

“We got rice and potato from the party office. Since we did not have a BPL card so we did not get free rations from the beginning. From the second month we started getting 5 kg rice free of cost through ration. Since we have 5 cards so we received 25 kg rice. We did not get anything other than rice,”
– Bina Dhara.

¹² Food and Supplies Department, Government of West Bengal, Notification, Memo No. 1205-FS/Sectt./Food/14R-01/2013 (Pt. III), 26 March, 2020, https://prsindia.org/files/covid19/notifications/1149.WB_PDS_Entitlement_March_26.pdf

¹³ 'NFSA ration card categories – antyodaya (AAY), priority (PHH), non-priority (NPHH), state priority, Lopol, <https://www.lopol.org/article/nfsa-ration-card-categories-antyodaya-aay-priority-phh-non-priority-nphh-state-priority#:~:text=State%20Priority%20Ration%20Cards%20%28SPHH%29%20State%20priority%20cards,for%20any%20other%20rationing%20articles%20from%20ration%20shops>.

The announcement of free of cost rations was only available to enrolled beneficiaries of the various active government-run food subsidy programmes in West Bengal. In Bina Dhara's case, it was likely that their family had been moved to the priority category. The lack of universalisation of ration caused significant distress. Some WDWs we interviewed faced challenges despite being enrolled in schemes. Some had migrated from the address where they had enrolled which precluded them from accessing to PDS shops in their current location. They had to rely on support from non-profits for food support, and at times, even source foodgrain from the 'black market'.

Lakshmi Haldar said that they didn't get rations through the PDS because their ration cards show them as residents of their home village. Instead, they bought the rice that is illegally procured from PDS shops and sold in the market, locally referred to as 'control rice'. They also received dry rations from two NGOs and all these combined mitigated their worries about hunger. They didn't get help from the government or any political party.

Ujjwola Haldar said that they went to Ballygunge, to the office of a political party, for food coupons but only 20 food coupons were provided and most people came back without anything. She and her family have ration cards in their home village. She said that she did not want to apply for a ration card with her Kolkata address as she is afraid they may soon be evicted and her address will change again.

Impact of Cyclone Amphan

Compounding the dire situation of the lockdown, several parts of West Bengal were badly hit by Cyclone Amphan on May 20 and 21. Damage to the city's public infrastructure due to the cyclone further increased the uncertainty around essential supplies and transport that people were already experiencing. Some of the WDWs we interviewed also suffered severe damage to their property. South 24 Parganas, one of the districts which several WDWs in our sample belong to, was one of the most affected areas in West Bengal.¹⁴ The widespread damage led the government to announce sizable relief measures. These included the transfer of Rs 20,000 to 500,000 people for repairing the damage to their property, and the creation of a Rs 14.4 billion fund for relief activities.¹⁵

Ranu Shaw explained that more than 300 houses in her locality were severely damaged by the cyclone. The roof of her house was blown away and she had to take shelter under her bed with her children. Later, she approached one of her employers for support who promised to send tarpaulin through the party office. However, that did not materialise. A dozen women from the locality also went and spoke to people in the party office who said they would come to assess the damage but they didn't come.

The tiles on the roof of Ujjwola Haldar's home were blown away during the cyclone. She had asked an employer to lend her Rs 2000 to help with repairs but had not got the money when we spoke to her, a month after the cyclone. She also did not receive any help from the government.

A few weeks after the announcement of relief funds, several issues with the disbursement of funds came to light, leading to widespread public disaffection. The issues related to insufficient identification of genuine beneficiaries and corruption and implementation failures at the local levels¹⁶.

Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, also acknowledged that there were errors in drawing up the list of beneficiaries of the relief.

¹⁴ (21 May, 2020), 'Amphan: Kolkata devastated as cyclone kills scores in India and Bangladesh', BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52749935>

¹⁵ PTI, (04 June, 2020), 'West Bengal Govt Releases Rs 1,444 Crore Cycle Amphan Relief', News18, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/west-bengal-govt-releases-rs-1444-crore-for-cyclone-amphan-relief-2650061.html>

¹⁶ Suhrid Chattopadhyay, (31 July, 2020), 'Amphan: Relief as disaster', Frontline, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/article32005158.ece>

Access to Healthcare

While domestic workers would welcome government support and services, they don't rely on them. For healthcare needs, they prefer to go to private doctors and hospitals, as they feel that government hospitals are unable to provide quality care. Apprehensions with public healthcare were further heightened among WDWs during the pandemic as government hospitals were overcrowded and under-resourced.

"One of my relatives needed an emergency operation during the lockdown," said Shakuntala Noskor, who lives in Sonarpur, South 24 Parganas. "There was no bed available in any government hospital and we finally had to take her to a private nursing home. It was very difficult finding transport and organising the money. The nursing home was crowded and the police were called to manage the crowd. In all this, we were also afraid of catching the virus."

Lakshmi Haldar said that her daughter-in-law got a fever and they went to a private hospital and she recovered after taking medicines. Shonkari Mondol said that her son broke his hand and she took him to a private orthopaedic clinic. He was given medicines and three injections. Shonkari's mother was unwell too and went to a private doctor.

Future Employment

There were different reasons why WDWs had not been called back by some employers during the pandemic. Some of the more common reasons we found:

- Employers don't want to employ multiple workers.
- Employers don't want to employ workers who have multiple employers, that is, a worker who works in more than one household.
- Elderly or ailing employers were not letting people into their house.
- Employers also had lost some income.

There were some like Bina Dhara who are very worried about the immediate future. She and her son are the wage earners in a family of five. Her son and daughter-in-law are expecting their second child and so their expenses will increase. Her inability to go to work is a matter of serious concern. "I can't keep waiting for old employers to call me back. If I get new jobs, I will take them," said Ranu Shaw, who was also very worried.

Monju Haldar says that her employers are now more confident about housework and their dependence on her is less than before. Yet, she feels that there will always be demand for domestic workers. She says that once employers go back to their workplaces and their earlier activities they will not have time to do all the housework.

"My income has gone down and I have had to stop my son's tuition class. He is still attending one tuition but I can't afford to pay for two tuitions now. I have been doing this work for more than twenty years. I was worried earlier but I feel confident now. We are hearing about new jobs so I think things will work out after some time,"
– Shonkori Mondol.

The Way Ahead

It was evident from the interviews that WDWs feel that they have to rely on their own resourcefulness to best take care of themselves and their families whether it is getting services from the state or getting their jobs back. The interviewees said that they had felt insecure during the lockdown, were worried about getting their jobs back and concerned about being paid wages for the time they couldn't work because of the lockdown. Most of the women we interviewed had suffered a loss in income and were worried about the future. There were uncertainties in the job market that affected them, as well as others in their families in different kinds of informal employment.

WDWs lead an unprotected existence. Near-total invisibility in the policy space with hardly any legislation for women domestic workers leaves them vulnerable. The inequality and injustice inherent in the everyday working conditions of WDWs were heightened during the lockdown. There is no denying that the Covid-19 pandemic, the lockdown and the subsequent restrictions have created an unprecedented situation. However, policy protection and strong social security measures would have left WDWs less helpless against the pandemic.

Based on the interviews, we are outlining steps to be taken to create a protected and dignified work atmosphere for WDWs. Women domestic workers are returning to the workplace with increased surveillance and constraints on physical mobility. The question before us is how can different sections of society work to create a just and fair workplace for them. The Covid-19 pandemic could be seen as a defining moment in society's relationship to WDWs. The pandemic has laid bare the dependence of most households on the labour of these workers. Given the proportion of women workers employed in domestic work, it is critical for the state and other actors to create conditions for domestic workers to work in safe, fair and protected environments.

EMPLOYERS

Employers can be agents of positive change and ensure dignified working conditions for WDWs. They could take steps at an individual level, ensuring that any worker they employ is paid a minimum wage of Rs 45 per hour, has one day off every week, is enrolled in a health insurance scheme, and is entitled to paid maternity and sick leave.

A few employers could take the lead in housing complexes and residential localities to ensure that

- a) caste based discriminatory practices like separate lifts for residents and workers are done away with
- and
- b) fair employment practices are implemented.

STATE

The state has a significant role to play in ensuring the rights and welfare of its people. ILO C189 – Domestic Workers' Convention, 2011 (No. 189) was drawn up recognizing the special conditions under which domestic work is carried out, which make it necessary to supplement general standards with specific protections to enable workers to enjoy their rights fully. The Government of India needs to urgently ratify the Domestic Workers' Convention.

Public services like health and ration must reach the poor easily so that they are able to benefit from such entitlements. Attention must also be paid to affordable housing near workplaces to ensure economic security among WDWs. These measures will also help improve health and education parameters for poor communities.

Robust and workable social security schemes for WDWs are necessary to enable them to lead a protected and dignified life. The state must take active measures to enroll them and other informal workers in the Samajik Suraksha Yojana Scheme.¹⁷

Further, WDWs work for multiple employers, making it critical for state and central governments to fix a minimum wage for them and include domestic work in the Minimum Wages Schedule. This will enable workers to have a manageable workload and not have to work for as many as eight or even ten employers to make ends meet. WDWs must also be declared essential workers to enable recognition by the state and confer dignity to their profession. This will also be a step towards recognising the essential unpaid care work done by innumerable women in India.

Legislation must be backed up with budgetary provisions and be enforceable so that WDWs are able to work in safe environments. Without budgetary allocations, legislation is toothless and unable to be implemented on the ground.

WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS & NGOS

Actors working with WDWs must work with them to build and strengthen their strategy to organise. This will enable WDWs to increase their chances of collective bargaining and amplify their voices. These organisations will be the main vehicle for promoting and securing rights of WDWs.

Training workshops could be organized for members of WDW groups to equip them with different skills like organising, negotiating and bargaining. These skills will enable them to push for better conditions in the workplace both individually and collectively. Discussion and dialogue must be promoted between employer representatives and WDWs, to promote a cooperative approach to problem-solving. Alliances must also be built amongst WDW organisations, informal workers' organisations, social movements and trade unions to strengthen movements for rights of informal workers.

We also recommend that women's organisations and others document and analyse changes in the workplace of WDWs, especially given the rapidly shifting context of Covid-19. This would allow civil society to assess if the recent shifts are enabling a more equal workplace for WDWs in the medium and long terms or leaving them even more vulnerable.

¹⁷ (13 March, 2020), 'Samajik Suraksha Yojana | SSS Online Login', ArthikDisha, <https://arthikdisha.com/new-2020-samajik-suraksha-yojana-ssy-online-login/>

