



**IMPACT OF COVID 19
NATIONAL LOCKDOWN ON
WOMEN INFORMAL
WORKERS IN DELHI**

Institute of Social Studies Trust

KEY FINDINGS

This study is based on the macro data of all the respondents across five informal sectors – Domestic Work, Street Vending, Waste Picking, Home Based Work, and Construction Work.

68% of the respondents stated the inability to go out due to lockdown and police patrolling, while **55%** reported fear of contracting the disease as the main reasons for their inability to go out to work.

More than half of the women respondents indicated the unequal division of the domestic responsibilities and stated that no one helps them with household chores.

The sample size was **176**.

66% of the respondents indicated an increase in unpaid work at home and **36%** reported increased child and elderly care burden.

Food shortages seem to affect **60%** of the women respondents.

69% of women mentioned an increase in prices as the major problem in accessing most of the essential items.

71% of respondents stated that they were spending out of their personal or household savings to manage the daily expenses in the absence of income.

Around **83%** of women workers covered in the study are facing severe income drop.

One-third of the respondents highlighted the additional burden of arranging food.

Almost half (**49%**) of the respondents were dependent on PDS for the availability of food and **31%** received cooked food by the government at camps/night shelters.

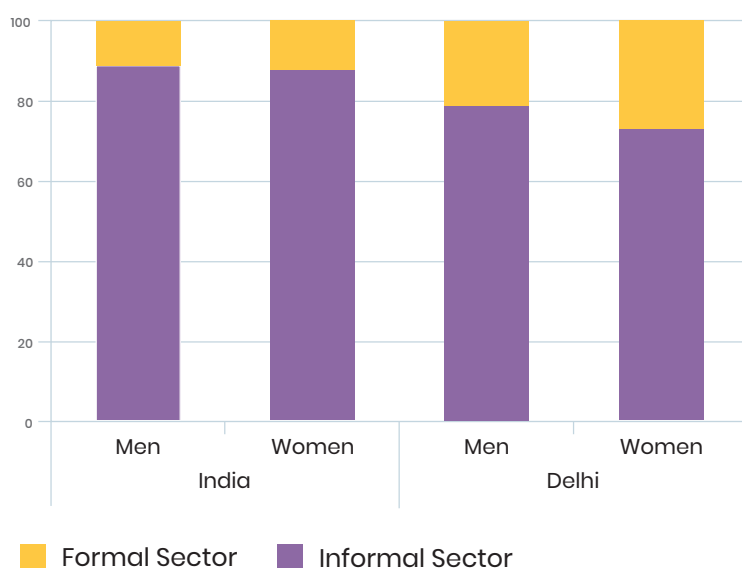
Post lock down the immediate concerns for the women respondents are continued loss of paid work and payment of house rent.

INTRODUCTION

Across the world, women are inevitably involved in some kind of productive and/or reproductive activity but much of their work is invisible and they are largely employed in low skilled, low paid informal sectors with little or no social security. Furthermore, women working in the informal sector face different structural constraints and women in poor households are more likely to work in the informal sector and they are often to be found in the more vulnerable categories of work, for instance as domestic workers or self-employed home-based workers (Chen, 2016¹; Chen and Raveendran 2012²; Raveendran, 2017³; Sastry, 2004⁴).

According to the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017–18, **88%** of total women's employment is informal in India and about **40%** of women in the informal sector are home-based workers or domestic workers. However, in Delhi, the proportion of informal sector employment is lower for both men and women relative to the national average but still, a majority of the employed women (**73%**) earn their livelihoods working in the informal sector (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Gender-wise Employment in Formal and Informal Sector in 2017–18



Source: computed from PLFS unit level data on Employment and Unemployment
Note: Usual Status of employment is considered.

¹Chen, M. A. (2016). The Informal Economy: Recent Trends, Future Directions. *NEW SOLUTIONS: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy*, 26(2), 155–172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1048291116652613>

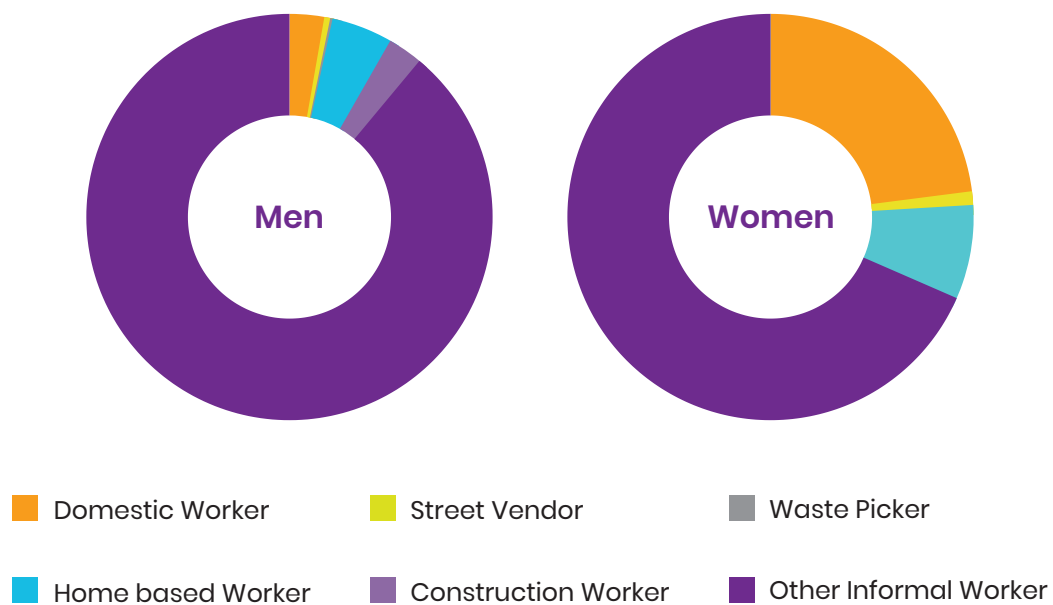
²Chen, M. A., & Raveendran, G. (2012). Urban Employment in India: Recent Trends and Patterns. *Margin: The Journal of Applied Economic Research*, 6(2), 159–179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097380101200600204>

³Raveendran, G. (2017). Women and Men Operators of Enterprises in India's Informal Sector, *Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)*, Statistical Brief No. 18, Available at: <https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/Raveendran-Women-Men-Operators-Enterprises-India-Informal-Sector-WIEGO-SB18%20.pdf>

⁴Sastry, N.S. (2004). Estimating Informal Employment & Poverty in India, Discussion paper series 7, Human Development Resource Centre, UNDP, India.

A gender-wise division of informal workforce highlights that in Delhi, nearly one-third of the total women informal workers are employed in two occupations, domestic work and home-based work while domestic work is the dominant one among the five occupations (Figure 2). A minuscule percentage (less than even 2%) of women informal workers are involved in street vending in Delhi in 2017-18. It is worthwhile to mention that very few women work in informal construction and waste picking activities and men appear to be the key players while women usually work as support workers.

Figure 2: Distribution of the employed population in informal sector by sex in Delhi (percentages, 2017-18)



Source and Note: Same as Figure 1.

With this huge informal workforce and persistent gender-based occupation segregation, it is needless to mention that the COVID-19 pandemic is intensifying pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection and women bear the brunt most simply by virtue of gendered norms. Against this backdrop, ISST has attempted to understand the immediate impact of COVID-19 imposed lockdown on women informal workers working in five different sectors (namely, Domestic Work, Street Vending, Waste Picking, Home Based Work, Construction Work) located in both rural and urban areas of Delhi, to assess:

the impact of the COVID-19 imposed lockdown on women's paid and unpaid work, livelihoods and access to public infrastructure and basic essential items.

the challenges women are facing and the strategies they are adopting to cope up with this COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockout owing to this.

SECTOR PROFILE

The data for the study was collected through telephonic surveys of women workers and in-depth telephonic qualitative interviews with key informants and a few women workers in each sector with the support of different partner organisations (Chetnalaya, Janpahal, Bal Vikas Dhara, Mahila Housing Trust, Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangham) working in each of these five sectors in Delhi during the second phase of lockdown (15 April-3 May 2020). These partner organisations interviewed 35 women adults in each of these five sectors (36 in case of construction work) and gathered information about the impact of the COVID-19 on their day-to-day life along with their socio-economic background to get broader insights on the situation of these workers. Table 1 describes the basic demographic profile of the respondents and they belonged to the age group of 20 to 60 years, while the average age of the women respondents was 38. Out of the total women respondents, **82%** were married with the exception of 8 divorced/separated and 19 widow respondents. In the sample, respondents' household size ranged from 0 to 28 while on average, there were 6 members in each household. Around **45%** of them have children below 14 years of age. **15%** of them stated that they have at least one unemployed member in their house and 9 percent reported having children of less than 14 years age as well as elderly people in the house.

Table 1

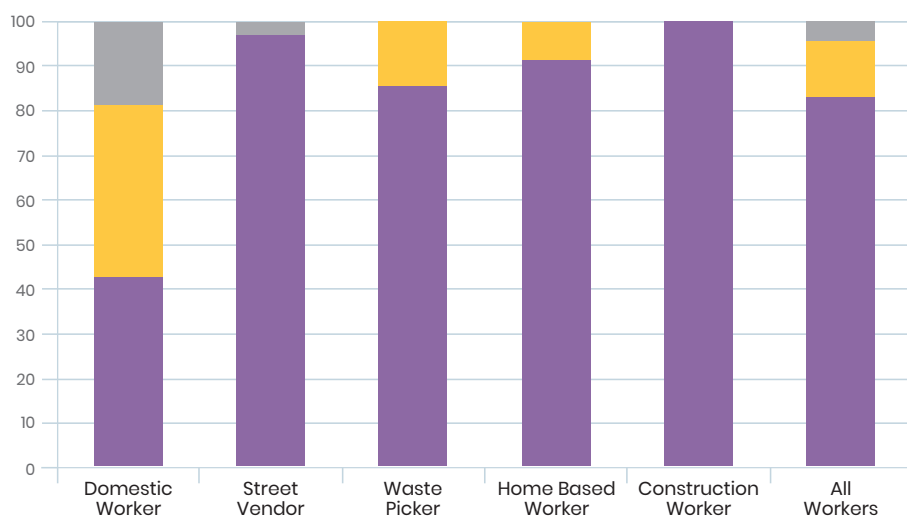
PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS				
OCCUPATION	AVERAGE AGE	MARITAL STATUS	AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD SIZE	LOCATION
DOMESTIC WORKER	36.8	60% married 20% divorced or separated 17% widowed	4	Shahpurjat, Tilak Nagar, Okhla, Julena, Andrews Ganj, Mephar Garden, Gulmohar Park, Kalender Colony (Dilshad Garden) and Kotla
STREET VENDOR	39.7	77% married 23% widowed	6	Jwala Nagar, Mandawali, Chidhiyaghar, Laxmi Nagar
WASTE PICKER	34.5	91% married	6	Rangpuri Pahadi
HOME BASED WORKER	35.8	97% married	7	Savda Ghevra, Bakarwala
CONSTRUCTION WORKER	41.5	83% married	6	Dwarka, Bavana, Rohini, Haiderpur, Shahbad Dairy

Note: Total Sample Size was 176

IMPACT ON PAID WORK

Emerging evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on paid work suggests that women's economic and productive lives will be affected disproportionately and differently. In India, women generally shoulder greater care burden at home and work at the lower ladder of the workforce, so their jobs will also be unduly affected by cuts and lay-offs owing to the COVID-19 (Ghosh, 2020, Seguino, 2020⁵). The study points to the major impact of the lockdown on the earnings of women workers and **83%** of them are facing severe income drop, while the sector-specific results indicate some interesting patterns (Figure 3). Construction workers are the worst hit as all of them reported a loss of paid work while **97%** of the street vendors reported that there was no income during the lockout period. Further, only **6%** of the construction workers received the relief amount from the Delhi Building & Other Construction Workers Board (DBOCW) and no special benefit has been announced by the Delhi welfare board especially for the women construction workers during the crisis period of COVID-19. **54%** of women street vendors have taken emergency loans from the local moneylenders at a very high-interest rate to eke out a living and among them, **37%** are finding it difficult to repay the loans. Similarly, **91%** home-based workers and **86%** waste pickers revealed that there was a major impact of the lockdown on their earnings. Women home-based workers stated that owing to the closure of factories and supply chain disruptions, restrictions on transports carrying raw materials and payments withheld by sub-contractors/employers their income dropped significantly.

Figure 3: Impact on Income/Earnings



Note: Total Sample Size was 176

■ Severely, no income ■ Moderately, significant fall in income ■ No Impact

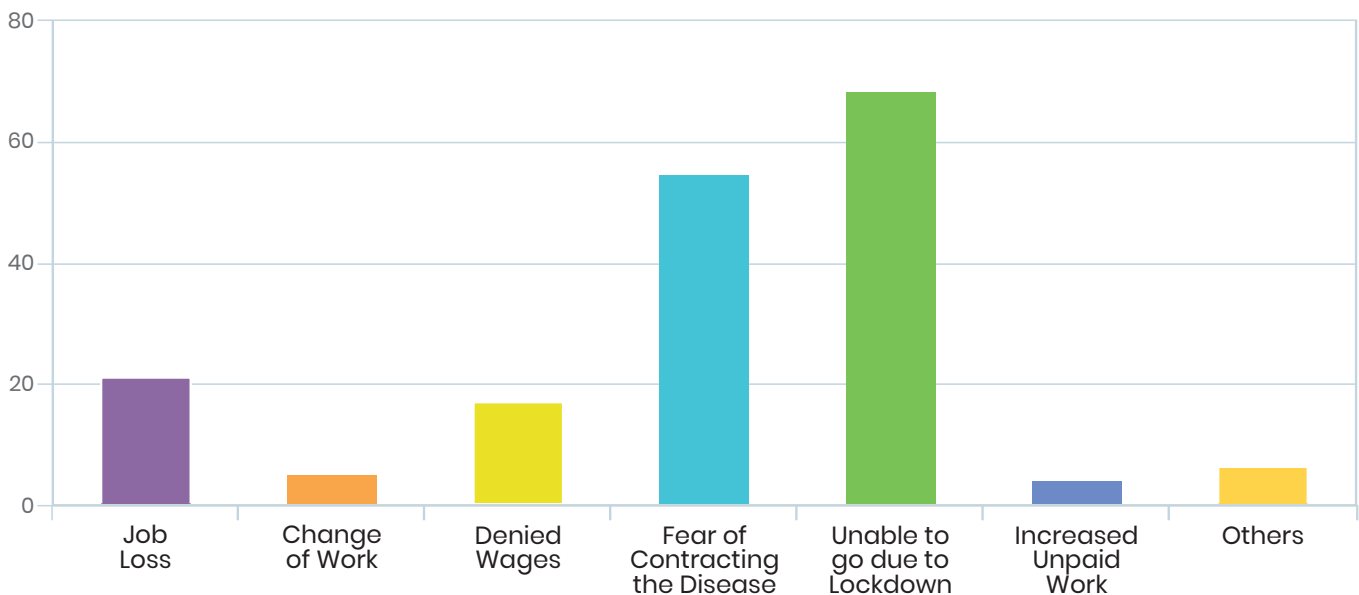


Suneeta, a home-based worker from Savda JJ colony has not received any work or money since March 20th and when she demanded payment for the work already done before lockdown, the contractor refused so (April, 2020).

⁵<http://www.iaffe.org/covid19-pandemic/>

Most of the waste pickers reported that they were facing difficulty not only in collecting waste owing to restriction on movement but also suffered difficulty in segregating and selling the same as all shops were closed. They are also forced to sell at significantly reduced prices as only a few dealers are working. While the impact of this pandemic on domestic workers' income or wages appeared less as most respondents reported that their employers had paid them salaries for March. However, they anticipated a cut in salaries for April and May if the lockdown continued. With a further probing question about the reasons for their drop in income, several respondents have opted for more than one reason and among them, **68%** of the respondents stated the inability to go out due to lockdown and police patrolling, while **55%** reported fear of contracting the disease and unavailability of protective equipment as the main reasons for their inability to go out to work (see Figure 4). **21%** of women workers indicated the job loss owing to this COVID-19 and lockdown as the reason for their drop in income.

Figure 4: Reasons for Drop in Income



Note: Total Sample Size was 176. Percentage values are based on multiple responses.

IMPACT ON UNPAID WORK

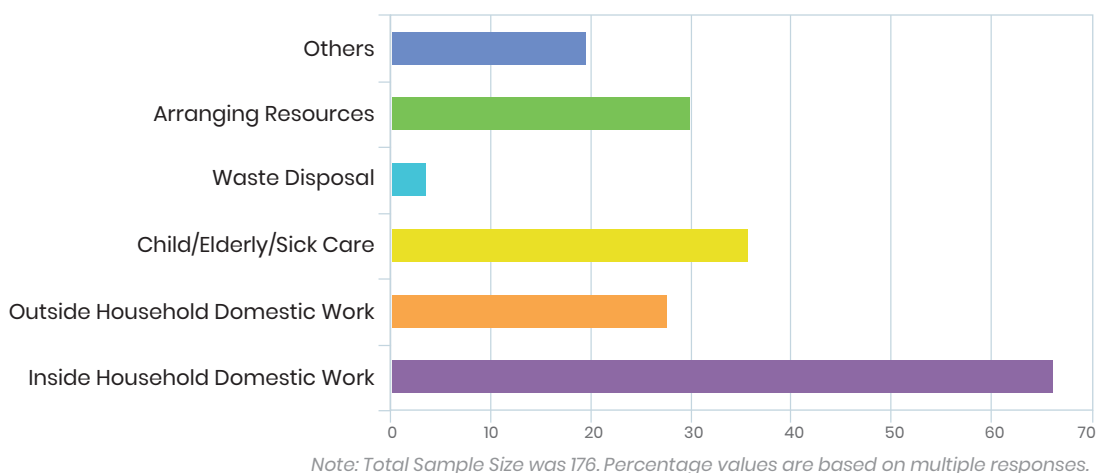
The COVID-19 crisis has made starkly visible the fact that along with the gross imbalances in the gender distribution of unpaid care work there has been a significant increase in unpaid work within the household (Folbre, 2020⁶). Figure 5, shows that in the sample, out of the total women respondents, **66%** reported an increase in inside household domestic chores as because of the lockdown, all the household members are staying at home which directed to an upsurge in their volume of work. **36%** of the women respondents stated increased child and elderly care burden during this period. It is not only unpaid work at the household which has increased but a significant proportion (**30%**) of women respondents also highlighted the additional

⁶<http://www.iaffe.org/covid19-pandemic/>

burden of arranging food during this period because of the stringent implementation of the lockdown and the increased instances of police harassment of men. One of the respondents who is a domestic worker stated that

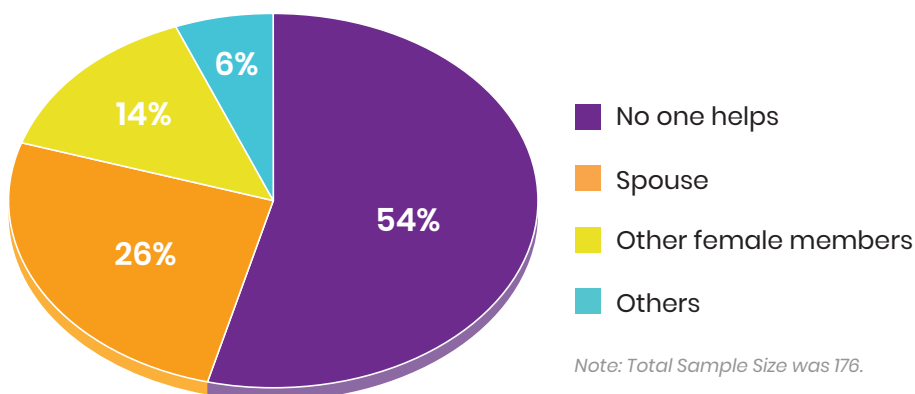
All work has fallen on me as I don't let my children go out to market especially my son because strict police patrolling is going on and they mostly stop boys for interrogation; police is even hitting them therefore out of fear I don't let my son step out. (Seema, Chirag Delhi, April, 2020)

Figure 5: Reasons for Increase in Unpaid Burden



Along with that when cooking fuel and drinking water is not readily accessible, then women have to provide them for the family by hook or by crook and in the sample, **28%** of women indicated it as another burden on their shoulders. Out of the total respondent's **54%** of the respondents stated that nobody helps them while **26%** of the women respondents received help from their spouse in managing domestic chores (Figure 6). Moreover, the existing gendered norms and patriarchal nature of the society is also increasing the burden of domestic chores for adolescent girls during this pandemic⁷.

Figure 6: Who Helps with Household Chores?



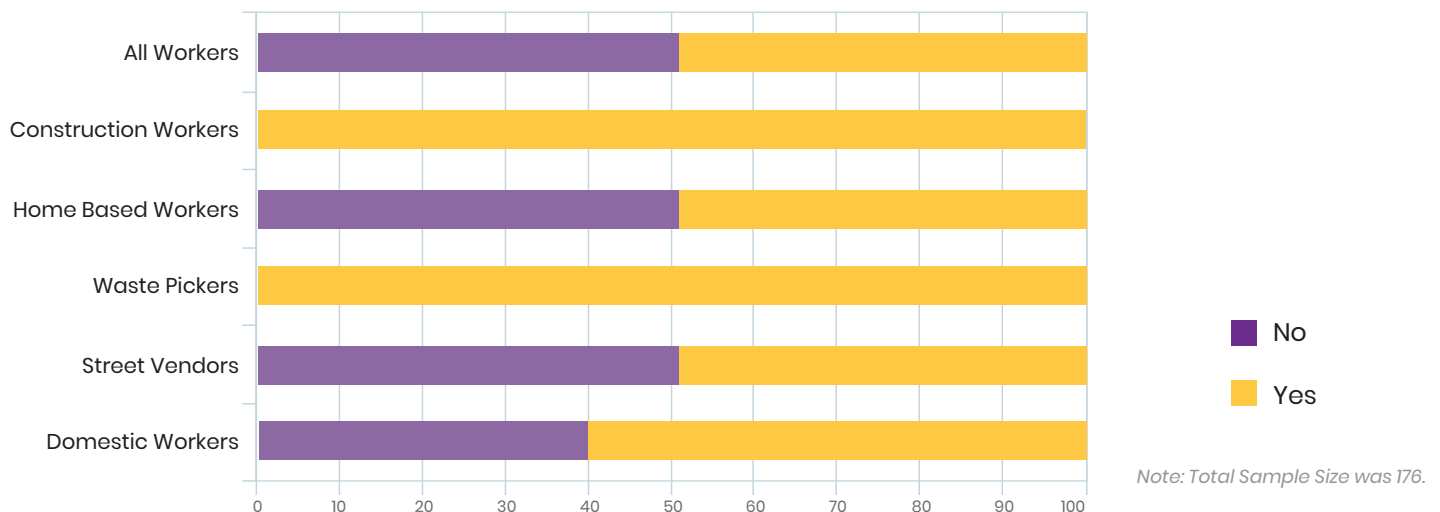
⁷UNICEF, Plan International, UN Women (2020). A new era for girls: taking stock of 25 years of progress: <https://www.unicef.org/media/65586/file/A-new-era-for-girls-2020.pdf>

IMPACT ON ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE AND BASIC ESSENTIAL ITEMS

The survey results indicated that **60%** of all the women respondents have witnessed severe shortages in food supplies while all the construction workers and waste pickers stated about the scarcities of food since the lockdown started (Figure 7). In terms of accessing basic essential food items, when India is already suffering from a “level of hunger that is serious”⁸ the recent International Labour Organisation report indicated that as a result of COVID-19, an estimated 400 million informal sector workers are at risk of abject poverty in India⁹. Informal sector workers who survive on meager and unreliable daily wages have lost access to jobs since March 24 and they are in the dire need of at least some sort of food security. Sen, Rajan, and Banerjee (2020) have already suggested using India’s foodgrain stock to feed the poor and they have recommended to universalise PDS for at least the next six months¹⁰. With there being more than 77 million tonnes of food grains in warehouses, which is more than sufficient of a year’s quota of ration under the National Food Security Act, India can afford to do so and the center also has announced providing food grains to each beneficiary under the Public Distribution System (PDS). But it has some serious drawbacks, as a huge proportion of working poor are outside the PDS net and they are also food insecure (Sinha, 2020¹¹; Dreze, Khera and Mungikar, 2020¹²). One of the respondents who is a waste-picker shared that

When lockdown started, we received 10 kg rice and 2 kg pulses, but we are 8 members in the family and it did not last long. (Savita, Bengali Basti, Rangpuri Pahadi, April, 2020)

Figure 7: Any shortages in food supplies since the lockdown?



⁸<https://www.globalhungerindex.org/results.html>

⁹https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_740877.pdf

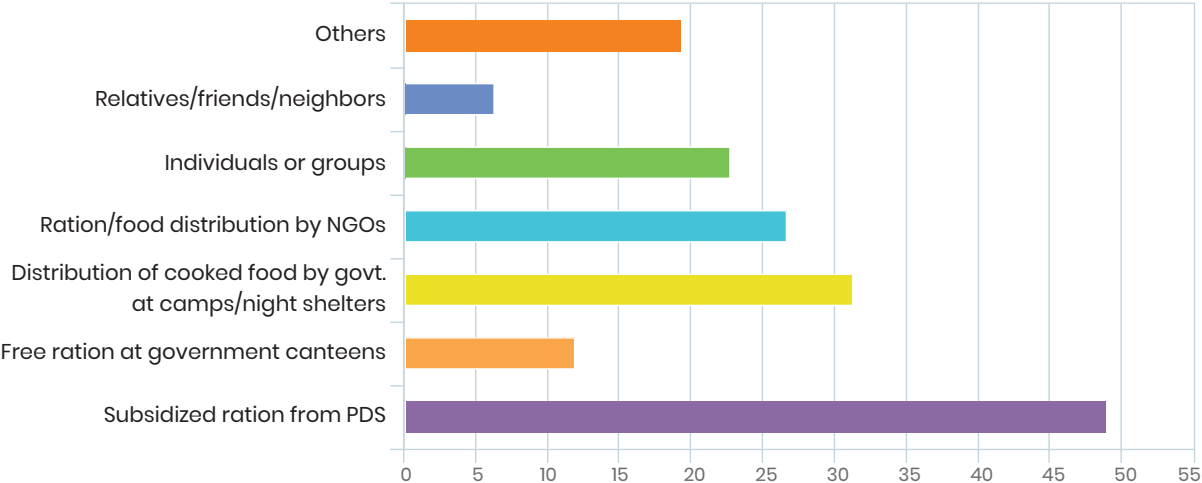
¹⁰<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/coronavirus-india-lockdown-economy-amartya-sen-raghuram-rajn-abhijit-banerjee-6364521/>

¹¹<https://thewire.in/rights/covid-19-lockdown-food-supply-pds>

¹²<https://thewire.in/food/covid-19-lockdown-food-pds-india>

Out of the total respondents, almost half of them were dependent on the Public Distribution System (PDS) for the availability of food and **31%** received cooked food by the government at camps/night shelters in Delhi (Figure 8). But, in accessing these, they needed to stand in long queues for several hours daily where social distancing was sometimes difficult to maintain, and often, they had to return empty-handed after food supplies would run out. Table 2 shows several essential services that the workers faced difficulty in accessing and **32%** of women have described lack of transport while **31%** reported the scarcity of essential medicine as difficult to access during this lockdown period.

Figure 8: Source of Obtaining Food



Note: Total Sample Size was 176. Percentage values are based on multiple responses.

Table 2: Which of the Essential Services have been Difficult to Access?

Essential Services	Percentage of Women Respondents
Essential medicines	30.7
Sanitary napkins/Contraceptives	7.4
Healthcare services	25.6
Housing	8.5
Transport	32.4
Access to Bank/ATMs	19.3
Mobile Recharge Shops	21.0
Other	25.0

Note: Total Sample Size was 176. Percentage values are based on multiple responses.

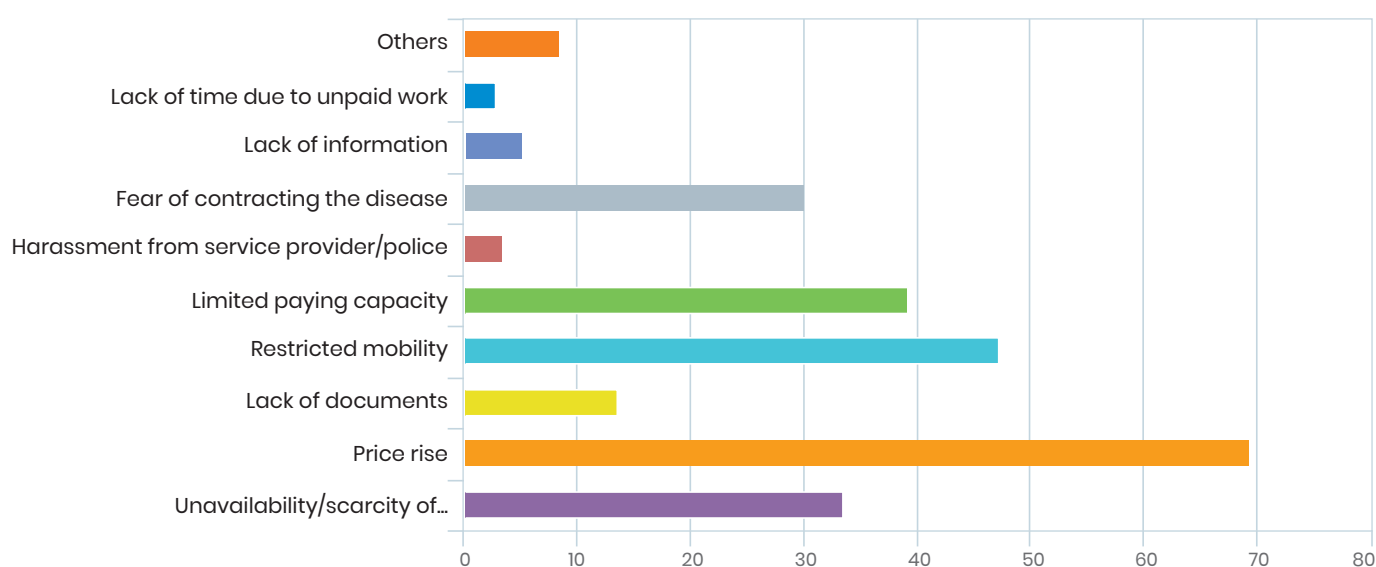
On being asked what challenges they are facing in accessing food, fuel, water supplies, and other essential services, around **69%** of women mentioned an increase in prices as the major problem in accessing most of the essential items (see Figure 9).

One of the respondents shared that

*These days shopkeepers are not giving anything without cash and they have also increased the price.
(Meena, Bengali Basti in Rangpuri Pahadi, April, 2020)*

While **47%** have reported about the restricted mobility and **39%** shared about their inability to bear the price as major barriers in accessing essential items.

Figure 9: Challenges in Accessing Essential Services

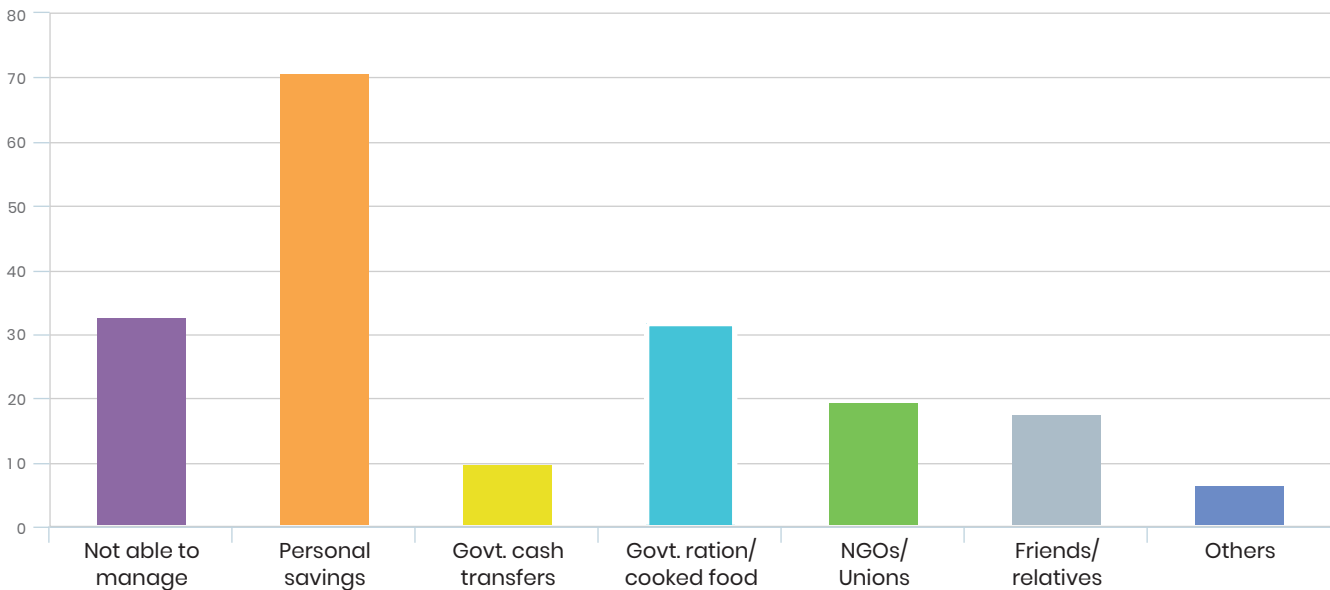


Note: Total Sample Size was 176. Percentage values are based on multiple responses.

COPING MECHANISMS

81% of women mentioned television as their major source of information about the COVID-19 outbreak and they seemed to be aware of the health effects of COVID-19. But, one-third of them stated that they found it difficult to follow the preventive practices against the deadliest virus because of the unavailability of hand sanitizers/soap required for frequent hand washing and one-fourth of them reported that they are not able to follow social distancing due to crowded spaces in their neighbourhood. **71%** of respondents stated that they were spending out of their personal or household savings to manage the daily expenses in the absence of income (Figure 10). While **32%** have received ration or cooked from government sources and very few of them (less than 10%) reported receiving Direct Benefit transfer of a minuscule amount Rs. 500 as a one-time transfer into Jan Dhan accounts but many of them reported in the qualitative interviews that they have not been able to withdraw anything because of the inaccessibility of bank/ATMs due to lack of transport.

Figure 10: Coping with Economic Vulnerability

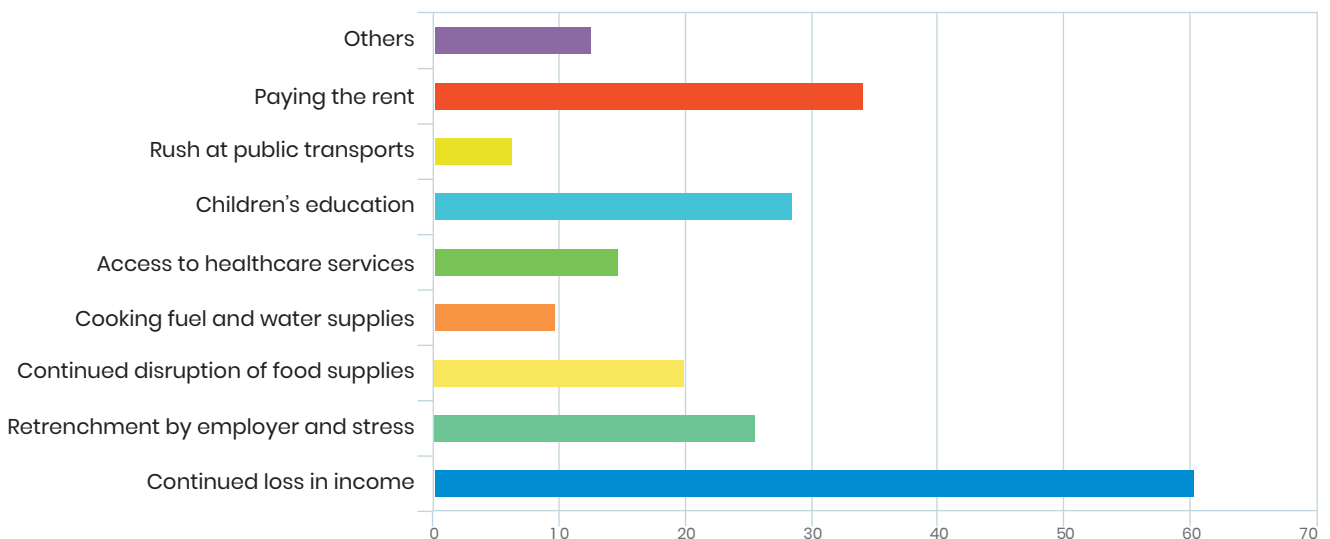


Note: Total Sample Size was 176. Percentage values are based on multiple responses.

CONCERNS AFTER LOCKDOWN

The COVID-19 pandemic has already transformed into an economic and labour market crisis, impacting not only the supply side (production of goods and services) but also demand (consumption and investment) and the uncertainty and unprecedentedness associated with it will have far-reaching impacts on labour market outcomes. Its subsequent economic shocks will have a multiplier effect on specific marginalized groups like women who are more vulnerable to any adverse labour market shocks. The survey results indicated that when these women informal workers are already struggling in their day to day life, they are more concerned about the continued loss of paid work and payment of house rent (which accrued during the lockdown) when the lockdown will be lifted (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Immediate Concerns Once Lockdown is Lifted



Note: Total Sample Size was 176. Percentage values are based on multiple responses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

So, under this indeterminate situation, at least some sort of minimum employment guarantee scheme(s) from the government is likely to help informal workers as a stopgap solution in case of no work.

There is no doubt that with a further reservation for women in these schemes, a considerable percentage of women informal workers will be benefitted.

Similarly, universalising the PDS with a higher quantity of food grain allotment for at least the next few months with more publicity is definitely a worth try.

Moreover, in places where PDS outlets are far away, arrangements for some other local distribution outlets along with ease of e-coupon system will not only reduce the exclusion errors but also ensure that every person who is food insecure can access the same.

The impact of this pandemic on informal worker's wages/income is already devastating and there is a dire need to provide some cash transfer to every household to those known to be more vulnerable.

METHODOLOGY NOTE

This study on women informal workers in five different sectors (Domestic Work, Street Vending, Waste Picking, Home Based Work, Construction Work) is the combined report of all the micro study series on the impact of COVID-19 national lockdown on the livelihood of women informal workers in Delhi. ISST collaborated with several partner organizations (Domestic Worker Forum (DWF), Chetanalaya for Domestic worker, Mahila Housing Trust (MHT) for Home-based worker, Janpahal for Street vendors, Bal Vikas Dhara for Waste pickers and Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangham for Construction workers) to conduct telephonic surveys (by using google forms) with 35 women workers in each informal sector (for Construction Workers, the sample size was 36) between 23 - 30 April 2020. The ISST team also conducted qualitative telephonic interviews with key informants and a few women workers in each sector in rural as well as urban areas of Delhi, based on the access. All data collecting tools were translated in Hindi and consent was taken before any data collection. Names of women respondents have been changed to maintain anonymity.

AUTHOR

This report has been written by Shiney Chakraborty, Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi, May 2020.

Title image source: www.oneindia.com



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