



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

Institute of Social Studies Trust

KEY FINDINGS

80% respondents faced difficulty in going out to collect waste due to fear of disease and lack of PPE and police patrolling and livelihoods of **68%** respondents was affected due to shutting of godowns.

All respondents stated that they were facing severe shortage of food and **66%** of the respondents stated that they were also facing problem in accessing water and fuel.

77% and **69%** of all women respondents mentioned non-availability of resources and increase in prices as two major challenges in accessing essentials services respectively.

Most respondents depended on their personal savings and a mix of sources (NGOs and government for food/ration; help from friends/relatives) for managing expenses.

Since godowns shut down and the owners refused to pay wages, majority of the women complained of severe loss of income.

Extreme inadequacy of food despite provisioning by NGOs, governments and other individuals/groups. Lack of milk and milk powder a critical issue.

60% and **63%** women mentioned having to spend a lot of time in accessing essential resources and domestic chores outside the household (collection of fuel, food, water) as two major time-taking activities. Restricted mobility of men due to police patrolling added to this burden.

Livelihood, increasing poverty and lack of resources are major concerns highlighted by Sunaina, *"I am not sure what's going to happen. It seems we poor people will all die of hunger."*

Exploitation of waste pickers by dealers and contractors through reduction in prices of waste material from Rs 30 to Rs 4 per kg.

Respondents also faced problems in accessing essential medicines, healthcare services and in recharging their mobile phones.

Majority respondents had adequate awareness about COVID-19 and related health affects, however failed to follow precautions due to lack of resources such as soaps/hand sanitizers, water, space, food, etc.

INTRODUCTION

As part of ISST's research initiative to understand the immediate impact of Covid 19 imposed lockdown on women workers in the informal sector, this study specifically focuses on the plight of women waste pickers and segregators residing in bastis located in south west district of Delhi. The data for the study has been collected with the support of Bal Vikas Dhara (BVD), a twenty-six year old organization, working with the waste picking community in Delhi. Key Informants (KI), Mamta from BVD and Akbar from Basti Suraksha Manch (BSM), were also interviewed to get broader insights on the situation of these workers. The study aims to highlight the impact of the lockdown on the paid and unpaid work of the women waste workers and also to reflect on the challenges they are facing in their effort to cope with not only the health risk this pandemic poses but also the economic vulnerability that it has imposed.

WASTE PICKING AND SEGREGATING: THE WORK AND THE WORKER

As one tries to understand the whole channel of waste recycling system that works in a city like Delhi, one finds that the waste pickers are at the bottom of the long line of workers involved on a daily basis in this sector (Hayami et al., 2006¹). Majority of them being self-employed, earn a livelihood by picking waste, segregating it into various variety of dry waste and then selling it to 'dealers' who further this segregated waste into different recycling processes (Hayami et al. 2006; Chikarmane and Narayan 2009²). Thus one finds that while the pickers make an important contribution in not only keeping the city clean but also in the process of recycling unwanted waste into useful resources; their own income/ earnings largely depends on their ability to gather profitable waste and negotiating with contractors, dealers for better rates for their segregated material. This informality of arrangements results in precarious livelihood condition for these workers and keep them vulnerable and susceptible to any external environmental changes.

In Delhi, waste picking is mostly done by both men and women of the family, where in women are particularly involved in the tedious process of segregating waste, which they do from their homes, while also tending to their unpaid care responsibilities. Women also work in large godowns, where they segregate waste for over 10 hours every day on daily wage basis (Mamta (BVD), April 2020). The Worker respondents of this study are profiled in Table 1. Majority of them belonged to villages in Bengal and Bihar and had migrated from their villages to Delhi in search of work. They either belonged to lower caste or were Muslims.

¹Yujiro Hayami, A. K. Dikshit & S. N. Mishra (2006) Waste pickers and collectors in Delhi: Poverty and environment in an urban informal sector, *The Journal of Development Studies*, 42:1, 41-69.

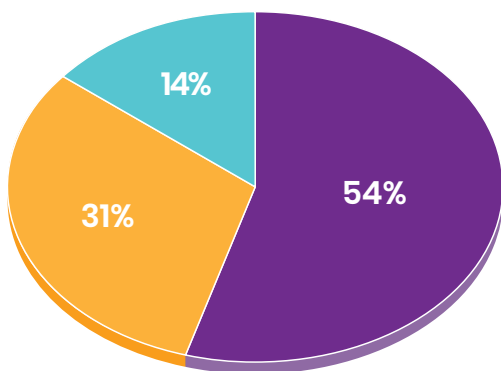
²Poornima Chikarmane and Lakshmi Narayan (2009), *Rising from the Waste, Organising Waste pickers in India, Thailand and the Philippines*, Committee for Asian Women

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

AGE GROUP	MARITAL STATUS
<p>21-60 years</p> <p>37% 21-30 years</p> <p>46% 31-40 years</p>	<p>91% MARRIED</p> <p>2.9% DIVORCED/SEPARATED</p> <p>5.7% WIDOWED</p>
MEMBERS	DEPENDANTS IN HOUSEHOLD
<p>25.7% 2-3 members</p> <p>51.4% 5-7 members</p> <p>22.9% 8-10 members</p>	<p>49% with only children below 14 years</p> <p>23% with unemployed adults & children below 14 years</p> <p>3% with elderly above 60 years</p> <p>11% with children below 14 years elderly above 60 years</p> <p>3% with unemployed adults; children below 14 years & elderly above 60 years</p> <p>11% with unemployed adults</p>

Study sites: Rangpur Phadi and Masoodpur (South-West Delhi); KIs from across Delhi, North, North-West, North East and South West Delhi

Figure 1: Type of paid work



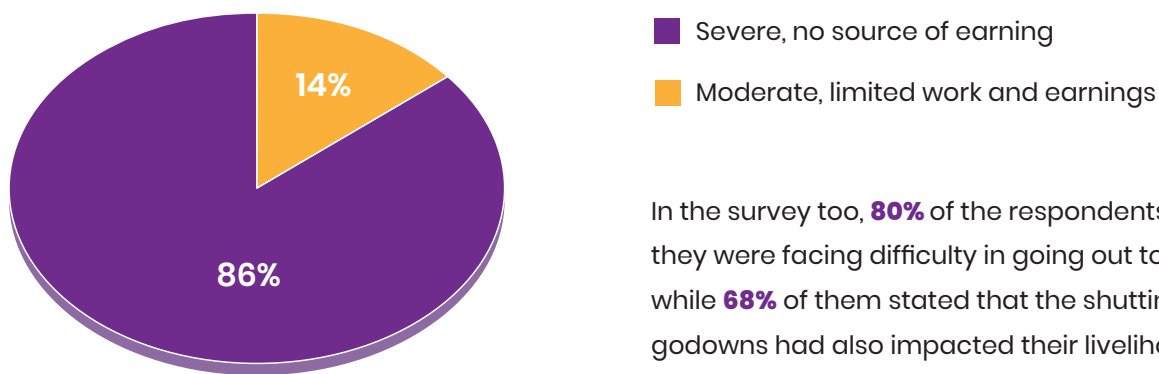
While a significant number of women respondents of this study were unpaid helpers, segregating waste at home, majority of them (**54%**) worked as daily wage workers in godowns, earning meager wages. About **14%** also stated that they work in godowns and also helped their husbands in waste picking and segregation (Fig 1).

- Segregate waste for Godown owner
- Segregate waste brought by husband
- Work in a Godown and also segregate waste brought by husband

IMPACT ON PAID WORK

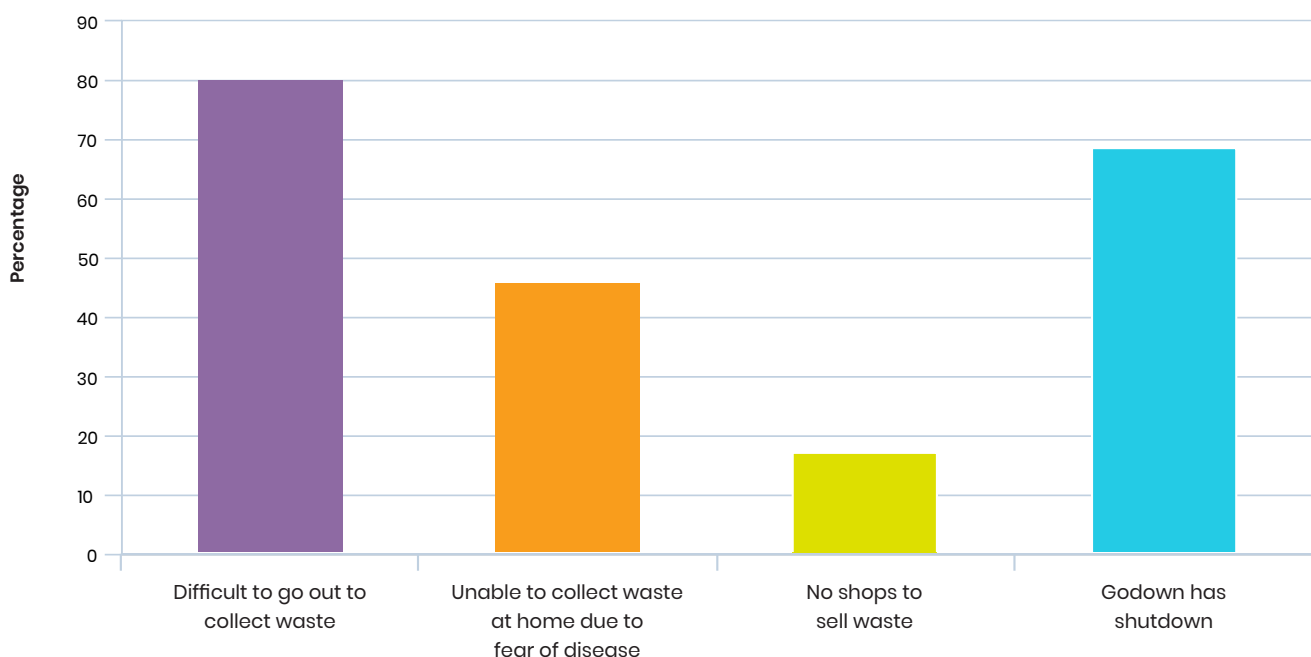
The sudden decision of the government to impose a nationwide lockdown on 25th of March 2020, filled billions of people across the country with fear and anxiety but most of all, created a massive situation of economic vulnerability for those who lack economic stability and depend on daily earnings for their survival. Waste pickers too, like other informal sector workers fall in this category. While television images showed thousands of migrant workers walking back to their villages, most waste pickers stated that they did not think of going back as they had no source of income in the village. Also, since their work falls under essential service, they initially felt that the lockdown will not affect their paid work. However, responses from participants revealed that there was a major impact of the lockdown on the earnings of these workers as seen in Figure 2. Since godowns shut down and the owners refused to pay wages, majority of the women complained of severe loss of income. Those who were self-employed, also faced difficulty in collecting waste owing to restriction on movement and those who managed to collect waste, shared that they faced difficulty in segregating and selling the same as all shops were closed.

Figure 2: Impact on income/earnings



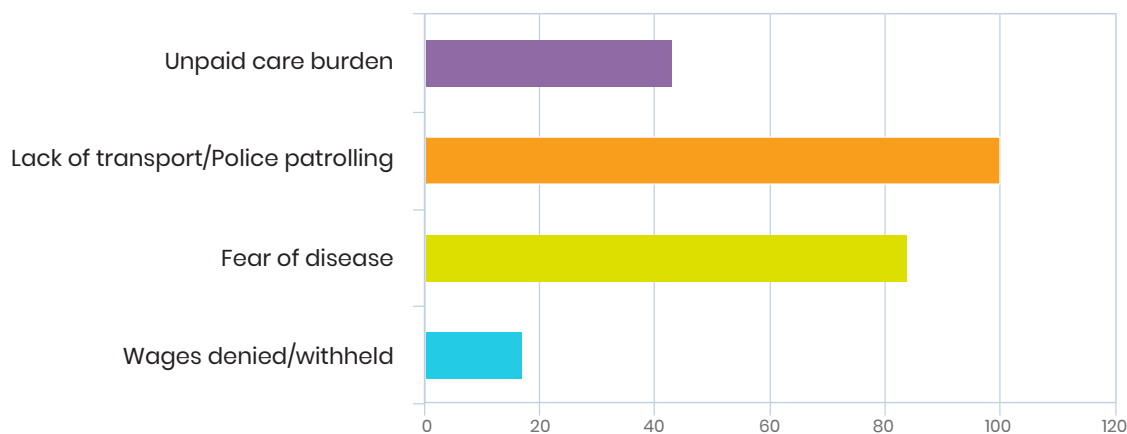
In the survey too, **80%** of the respondents stated that they were facing difficulty in going out to collect waste while **68%** of them stated that the shutting down of the godowns had also impacted their livelihood (Fig 3).

Figure 3: Impact on paid work



Quantitative survey as well as qualitative interviews revealed that the fear of the disease itself stopped many of the workers from continuing their work and even if the worker decided to go out, it was difficult to collect waste due to lack of transport and police patrolling (See Fig 4). Mamta from BVD stated that husband of many women workers would try and leave around 4 am in the morning to collect waste and many got beaten up by the police as they lacked necessary papers to prove their identity. Lack of space to collect waste and segregate it became another aspect which hampered the work, resulting in majority of the workers throwing away the collected waste wherever possible without any segregation. Akbar from BSM revealed that because of the lockdown, the dealers and contractors were exploiting waste pickers by reducing the price of the bottles and plastic from Rs. 30 per kilo, pre-lockdown, to Rs. 4 per kilo now. As such, the waste pickers had no choice but to agree to sell at significantly reduced prices as only a few dealers are working. Further, the workers also shared in interviews that lack of protective gear further enhanced their anxiety in relation to the disease and hampered their involvement in work.

Figure 4: Reasons for impact on paid work

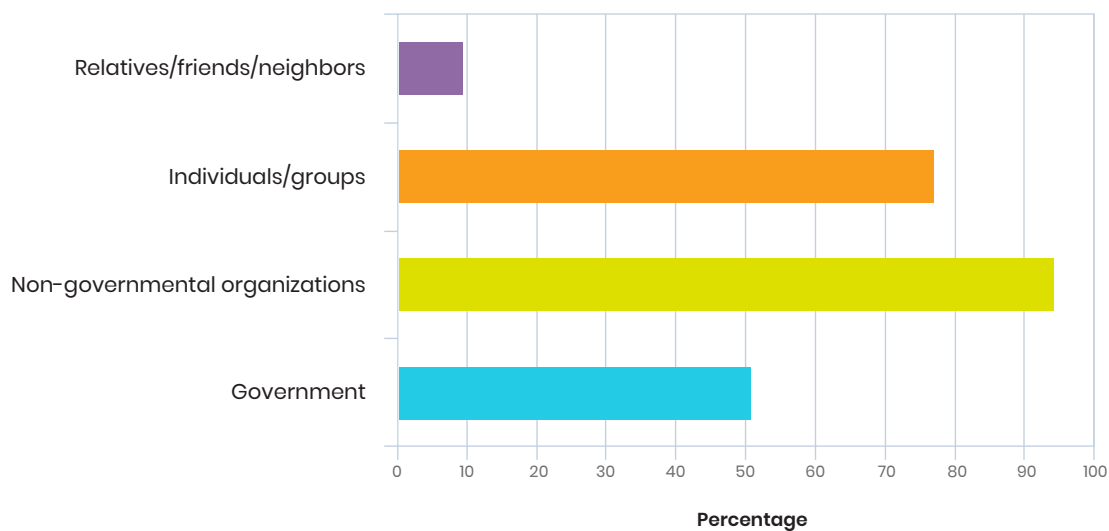


It was also found that some workers tried switching to selling vegetables but it did not work out as police did not give many of them entry to the mandis (vegetable markets) and the vegetable dealers also sold their goods to only those vendors whom they knew from before. Those who were able to put up a vegetable stall shared that earnings were low as compared to the investment in the business as there were many vegetable vendors, making competition tough and prices low.

IMPACT ON ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL RESOURCES AND SERVICES

With a significant impact of the lockdown on paid work and sources of earning, the workers, resultantly, also experienced significant impact on their access to essential resources, specifically food, water and fuel. In the survey all respondents stated that they were facing severe shortage of food and **66%** of the respondents stated that they were also facing problem in accessing water and fuel. Majority of respondents stated that they got ration/cooked food from several sources which include non-government organizations, government resources and also other groups distributing food in the local community (Fig 5). However, accessing food from these different sources required them to queue for several hours daily and often they would return empty handed as the food ran out because of large numbers of people.

Figure 5: Sources of obtaining food



Mamta from BVD informed that as several people did not have Ration cards, they helped people fill-in forms for E-coupons so that they could access ration from PDS shops. However, several respondents stated that filling of e-coupon forms did not help them much as either their e-coupons got rejected due to lack of proper documents or they were linked to PDS shops which were very far from where they reside and lack of transportation made it impossible for them to access these. Further, Akbar from BSM also highlighted another issue in accessing PDS shop. He stated,

“The PDS outlets are continuing with their practice of giving wheat grains. This is creating a problem as first people have to stand in long queues to get the wheat grains, then have to spend time in cleaning it and then also have to get it grinded into wheat flour from grinding shops which requires money. Also, because there are only few grinding shops open, people have to stand in long queues to get flour.”

(Akbar, BSM, April 2020)

³While the name of the KIs and the organizations they represent have been kept as it is, the name of the worker respondents have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

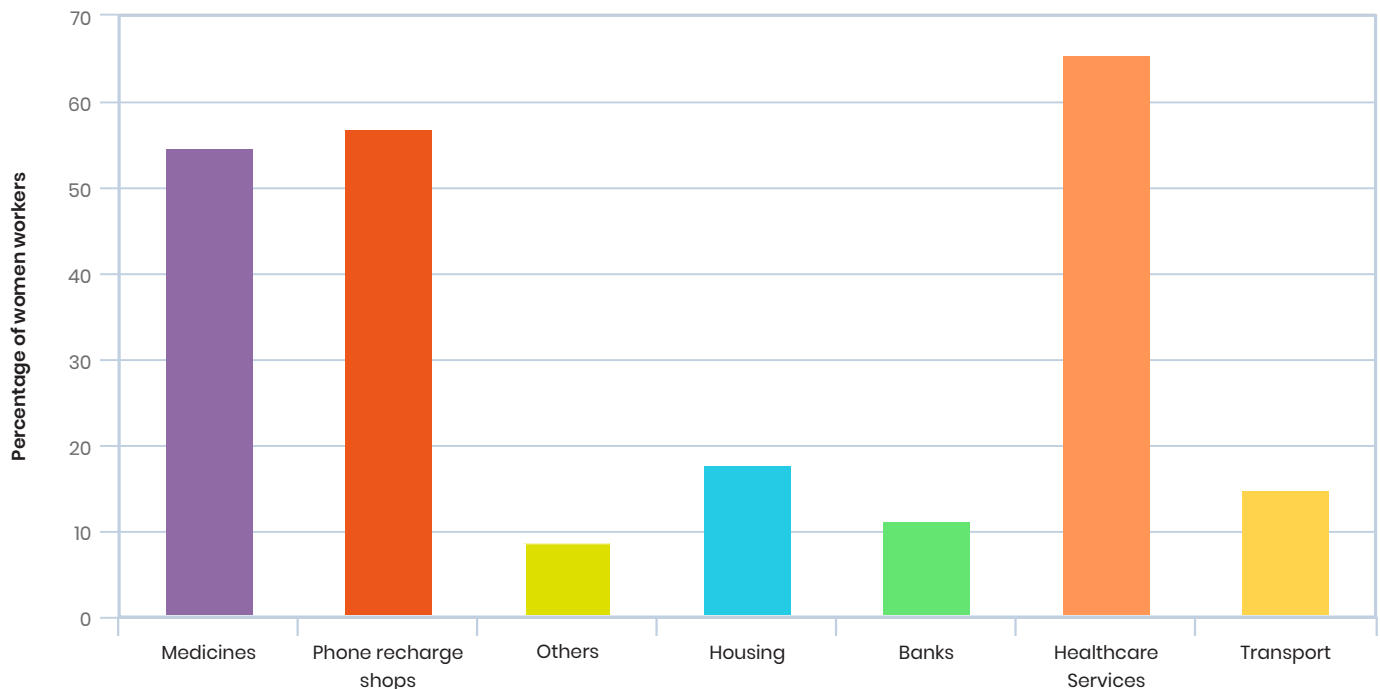
Respondents also complained of partiality in distribution of food in some places. Savita³ from Bengali Basti in Rangpuri Pahadi stated, “...those who are getting, get enough...and some don’t get any. Those who distribute food are partial and only want to give food to their people. They remove us from the queue and scold our children” (Interview, April 2020). Shortage of milk and milk powder also emerged as a major issue, specifically for families with infants and young children.

Lack of access to water and fuel also created immense pressure on these women as they had to spend several hours in trying to access these resources. Dulari Devi stated that she had been purchasing water everyday at a monthly expense of Rs 1500 but now that she was unable to pay the shopkeeper, he was refusing to give water. Mamta from BVD and her colleagues have been requesting to the government authority to send tankers to the area but no action had been taken yet. Respondents also shared that they were now fetching dry wood from the jungle as there was no money to purchase fuel,

“I don’t have a gas connection so I go to the jungle to get wood. I cover my face and wear gloves when I go. My husband doesn’t go as he is scared of the police...he says they will beat him up”. (Dulari Devi, Rangpuri Pahadi, April 2020)

Moreover, respondents also faced problems in accessing essential medicines, healthcare services and in recharging their mobile phones. Problems in accessing banks, transport facility and housing, specifically inability to pay rent were also significant (See Fig. 6).

Figure 6: Difficult-to-access essential services



The survey highlighted several other challenges that the workers faced in accessing most of these resources and services. Table 2 shows that while **77%** of all women respondents mentioned non-availability of resources as the main challenge, almost **69%** also mentioned increase in prices as another problem that they were facing in accessing most of the essential items. Restriction in mobility and lack of essential documents also came across as significant hindrances.

Table 2: Challenges in Accessing Essential Services

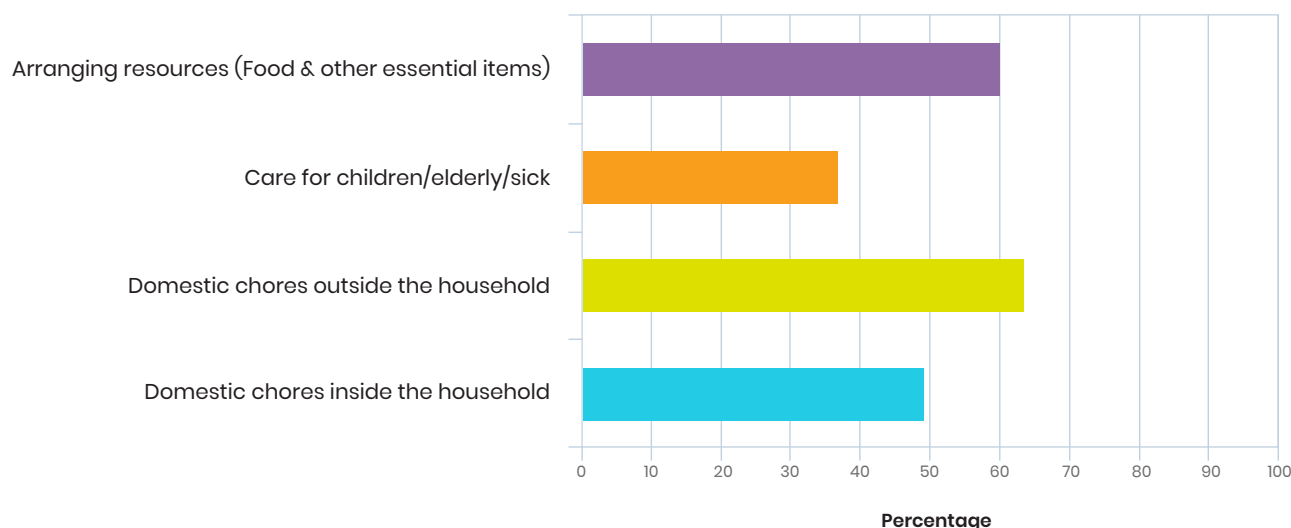
Challenges faced in accessing essential services	Percentage of women respondents
Scarcity of food/milk/medicines	77%
Price increase	69%
Limited paying capacity	29%
Restricted mobility	60%
Lack of documents	23%
Harassment from service provider/police	9%



IMPACT ON UNPAID WORK

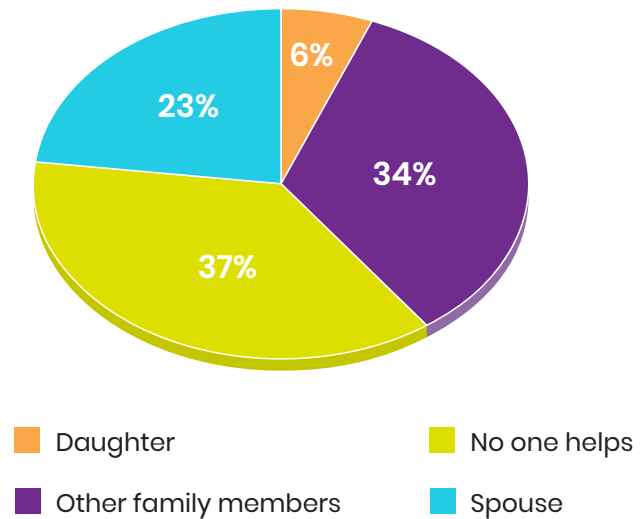
Though the burden of unpaid care is usually borne by women, the imposed lockdown brought in a new angle to it. It was seen that apart from the responsibility of inside and outside household chores and looking after children and elderly, **60%** women were now also having to spend a lot of time in accessing essential resources, and **63%** stated domestic chores outside household (such as fuel, food, water) as the most time taking activity (Fig 7). The latter pattern has emerged during the lockdown owing to the increased instances of police harassment of men found outside their homes. This has resulted for some like Savita, who now also has the responsibility of taking her mother-in-law who is suffering from diarrhea to the dispensary, besides caring for her infant child as her husband fears police harassment.

Figure 7: Reasons for increase in unpaid work



When asked who helps them in the household, **37%** of the respondents stated that nobody help them, but **23%** stated that their spouse helped and **34%** stated that other family members helped them (Fig 8). While most women did not seem too perturbed about the increase in household work since many received some help, it was mainly arrangement of essential services that caused physical and mental stress for the respondents.

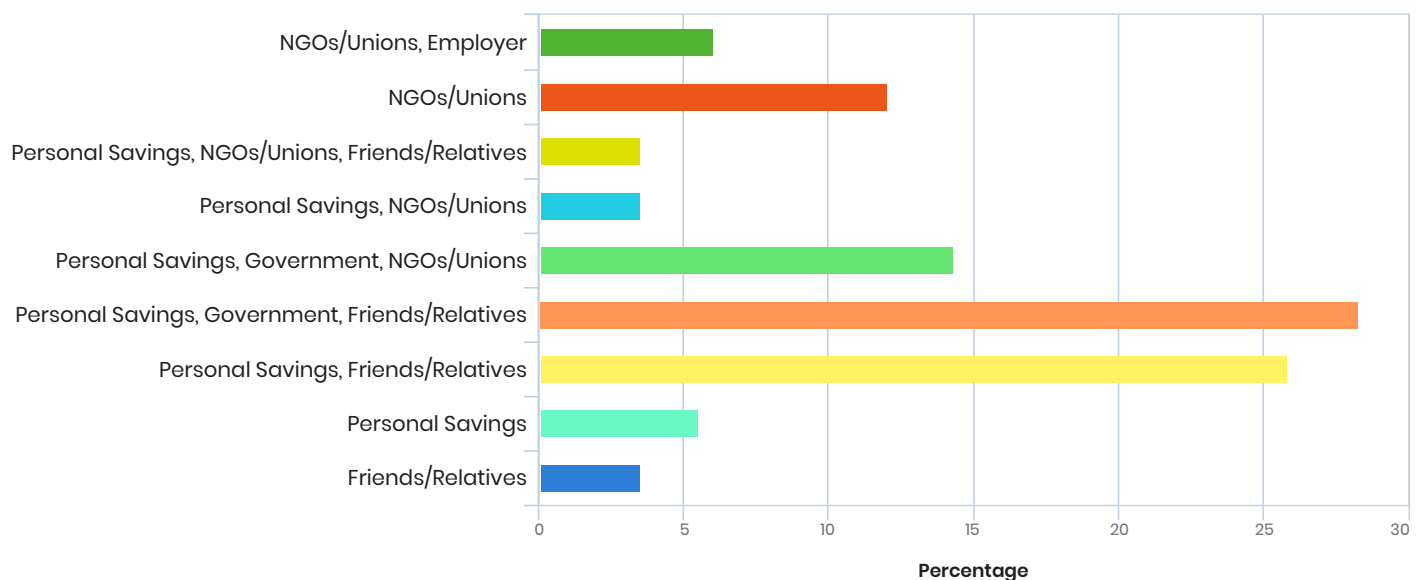
Figure 8: Who helps with household chores?



COPING MECHANISMS

Majority of the respondents seemed well aware of the health effects of Covid19 and necessary measures that are to be taken to ensure prevention from disease. However, most respondents stated that they found it difficult to follow the measures because of inadequate access to clean water and soaps/sanitizers required for regular hand washing. Also, necessary purchase of such items had put extra pressure on their expenses. Further, maintaining social distancing was difficult owing to large families sharing small spaces. Both KIs revealed that social distancing was not followed while standing in queues for food and ration as people feared that the food/ration would not be enough and they would not get any. Mamta from BVD, during her interview said, "...if you come here...you won't think any lockdown is going on. People are constantly moving from here to there looking for food" (Interview, April 2020). In spite of the difficulties, people were trying to follow necessary precautions; Akbar from BSM shared that because of the fear of contracting the virus, the workers now wear masks and gloves while handling waste which they did not practice earlier. They were also trying to wash their hands as often as possible.

Figure 9: Coping with economic vulnerability



In terms of coping with economic vulnerability, it was found that while most respondents were exhausting their personal savings to manage their everyday needs, they were taking help from a mix of sources as seen in Fig 9. These include help from ngos and government for food and ration and also financial help from friend and relatives. It was also found that none of the respondents of the study had received any money through Direct Benefit Transfer mechanism, mainly due to lack of necessary documents and lack of recognition of these workers in the essential service provider list made by the state government.

CONCERNS AFTER LOCKDOWN

The ongoing pandemic and lockdown have created a certain uncertainty of not only the present but also of the future, a state when there will not be a lockdown. The women waste workers, while struggling with the everyday problems that this lockdown is putting them through, are also extremely concerned of what is entailed for them and their family in the near future. Their main concern appears to be related to livelihood options, increasing poverty, lack of resources as Sunaina in her interview stated, "I am not sure what's going to happen. It seems we poor people will all die of hunger...." (Interview, April 2020). Rent and access to food largely played on their mind, but some also shared concern regarding their children:

"My children were going to school, learning...but now they are just sitting at home. I am worried that they will forget everything. I am not educated to help them; neither do I have the money for tuitions. What will happen to their future?" (Dulari Devi, Rangpur Pahadi)



RECOMMENDATIONS

Waste pickers are in an extremely vulnerable situation with both their health as well as livelihood being under threat. The informal nature of their work and the instability of the recycle market will surely cause numerous job loss amongst them if the lockdown continues for some more time. Hence, it is important that immediate steps are taken to protect these workers and ensure that they are able to earn their livelihood in a safe manner. Interview with KI and worker respondents highlighted several steps that can be taken keeping in mind the short-term and long-term vulnerabilities that these workers may have to struggle with for a long time, even after the pandemic ends. Some of them as recommendations are listed below:

All waste pickers must be recognized as essential service providers and issued identity cards so that they can go out to work without fear of being harassed by the police⁵. They must also be provided with essential protective gear, to prevent health risks⁶.

In terms of relief work, wheat flour to be provided instead of wheat grains to all workers, irrespective of availability of essential documents, so as to help them through this difficult period.

All RWAs and societies should be directed to provide weekly payments to waste pickers. They must also ensure provision of water and soap for the workers⁷. Residents should be encouraged to store dry waste and hand over to waste pickers once the lockdown is over.

Lastly, encouraging households across the city to segregate waste at source would help in decreasing the exposure of waste pickers to harmful materials⁸.

⁴<https://blogs.worldbank.org/sustainablecities/waste-workers-are-protecting-our-communities-during-covid-19>

⁵<https://www.wiego.org/resources/delhi-roundtable-network-letter-emergency-relief-waste-pickers>

⁶<https://www.wiego.org/resources/kkpkp-appeal-support-waste-pickers-light-covid-19-outbreak>

⁷<https://globalrec.org/2020/03/23/waste-picker-informal-waste-collectors-of-india-seek-safety-measures-from-indian-government-to-safeguard-against-covid-19/>

⁸<https://www.wiego.org/waste-pickers-essential-service-providers-high-risk>

METHODOLOGY NOTE

ISST partnered with Bal Vikas Dhara to conduct a telephonic survey (using google forms) with 35 women workers in the sector between 23 - 28 April 2020. The ISST team also conducted telephonic interviews with key informants and a few women workers in each sector, based on access. All data collecting tools were translated in Hindi and consent was taken prior to any data collection. Names of women respondents have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

AUTHORS

This Research Study has been carried out by Monika Banerjee, Research Fellow, ISST and Monika Sharma, Research Consultant, ISST, in April-May 2020.



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