



**IMPACT OF COVID 19
NATIONAL LOCKDOWN ON
THE LIVES OF WOMEN
CONSTRUCTION
WORKERS IN DELHI**

Institute of Social Studies Trust

KEY FINDINGS

All the respondents reported a loss of paid work.

64% of the respondents indicated an increase in unpaid work. There is also an additional burden on women to arrange food.

Access to health and medical services is a cause of concern. **33%** of the respondents reported that the access to sanitary napkins and contraceptives have been difficult.

Over **80%** of the respondents reported a shortage of cleaning essentials such as soaps.

The immediate concerns for the women include continued loss of paid work and access to food. Continuation of their children's education also reflected as a major concern.

In Delhi, only around **7.40%** of the registered workers who renewed their registrations under DBOCW have received DBT. Our study also indicates an abysmally low number (3 out of 41) of respondents receiving DBT. While there are only 5.4 lakh registered workers, the count increases to 10 -12 lakh when non-registered construction workers are included. This reflects the state's failure to provide cash relief to a large majority of workers.

More than **90%** of the respondents are dependent on PDS for the availability of food. Along with PDS there is also a significant dependence on other sources of food provided by the government and non state actors.

Over **72%** of the respondents have been finding it difficult to manage their expenses during the lockdown. Despite this, the prominent reason for not returning to their villages was their landlessness or lack of any employment in their village. Thus, the workers are only dependent on paid work available in Delhi.

Qualitative interviews with women workers also revealed that women are experiencing changes in the routine which is affecting their eating habits. Women are also feeling the emotional and mental stress related to the current dire circumstances and future uncertainties.

INTRODUCTION

The construction sector has a share of **9%** in the GDP of India. It employs roughly 5.5 crore daily wage labourers. The sector also houses the highest number of workers who have migrated¹. However, only 3.5 crore workers are registered with Construction Welfare Boards. The data on the construction sector suggests that the sector is a male dominated sector as around **89%** of the workers are male and only 11% are female². Within the sector, there exists hierarchy amongst workers with skilled labour being on the top and unskilled being at the bottom. Women mostly are at the bottom in the hierarchy³. A study on migrant women construction workers in Delhi shows that out of 501 women construction workers interviewed, **99%** of them were engaged in non mechanized work⁴. The sector is also marked with a widespread contract labour system. The employment in the sector is precarious with low or irregular payments. Moreover, the wage gap in this sector is highly gendered⁵. The female workforce in the informal economy and even more so in the construction sector is more prone to occupational hazards coupled with undernourishment⁶.

The construction sector in India is protected by two Acts⁷ namely; The Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act, 1996 and The BOCW Cess Act, 1996. In order to support construction workers during the nation-wide lockdown as a measure to control Covid-19 pandemic, the Union Home Ministry announced, Direct Benefit transfer (DBT) for registered workers from the Rs. 52000 crore cess collected under the BOCW Cess Act⁸. Delhi government has announced a DBT of Rs. 5000 per worker registered with Delhi BOCW Board (DBOCWB). In practice however, only those workers who have renewed their registration under the DBOCWB during the current year have received the cash benefit of 5000 Rs twice, once in the last week of April and the other on 7th and 8th of May 2020. This accounts for just 40,000 workers, a number which is far below the registered number of workers of 5.4 lakh under the Delhi Board. While the estimated number of construction workers in Delhi including the non-registered workers would be in the range of 10 to 12 lakh (KI, Bhatnagar). These numbers suggest the failure of the Delhi government to follow the central government's advisory under the BOCW Act to provide relief to all registered construction workers in the state, further, given the estimated number of construction workers in the state, only a miniscule number of workers have benefited from DBT.

¹Jan Sahas (2020). Voices of the Invisible citizens: A Rapid Assessment on the Impact of Covid-19 lockdown on Internal Migrant Workers. https://freedomfund.org/wp-content/uploads/Voices-of-Invisible-Citizens.pdf?mc_cid=5335a3b0e8&mc_eid=fe4e6490b8

²Shah, P., Pitroda, J., & Shah, M. (2020). Gender Inequality in Construction Industry: A Review. *Studies in Indian Place Names*, 40(60), 4552-4562.

³Hittangi, V. N. (2019). Redemption of Building and Construction Workers in India: Will-O'-The Wisp. In K.R. Shyam Sundar (Ed.) *Globalization, Labour Market Institutions, Processes and Policies in India: Essays in Honour of Lalit K. Deshpande*. (pp. 301-320). Palgrave Macmillan: Singapore.

⁴Acharya, S.S. and Reddy, S. (2017). Migrant women workers in Construction and Domestic work: Issues and Challenges. In S.S. Archarya, S. Sen, M. Punia & S. Reddy (Eds.) *Marginalization in Globalizing Delhi: Issues of Land, Livelihoods and Health*. (pp. 207-226). Springer: Singapore

⁵Anuja, S. (2019). Legal Issues/Acts and Provisions Related to Informal Sector in India: A case Study of Construction workers of Karnataka. In S. Panneer, S.S. Acharya & N. Sivakami (Eds.) *Health, Safety and Wellbeing of the Workers in Informal Sector in India*. (pp. 117-130). Springer: Singapore.

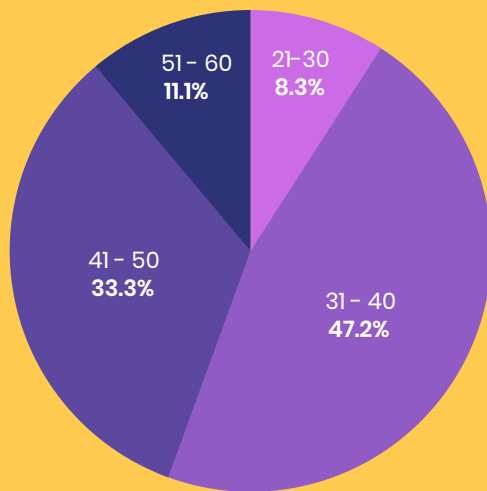
⁶Panneer, S. (2019). Health and Safety of Women workers in the Informal Sector: evidences from Construction and Beedi Rolling Works in India. In S. Panneer, S.S. Acharya, N. Sivakami (Eds.) *Health, Safety and Wellbeing of the Workers in Informal Sector in India*. (pp. 61-76). Springer: Singapore

⁷The BOCW Act 1996 stipulates social security and safety measures for the workers, while the BOCW Cess Act 1996 enables collection of cess from the employers for the benefit of construction workers registered with the respective states. The Act also directs each state to constitute BOCW boards to implement the provisions of the Act. There are mainly 7 functions of the board viz. (a) immediate assistance in case of accident, (b) pension (c) loan for housing, (d) group insurance, (e) financial assistance for education of children, (f) medical expenses and (g) maternity benefits' (Key informant (KI) Subhash Bhatnagar, NMPS).

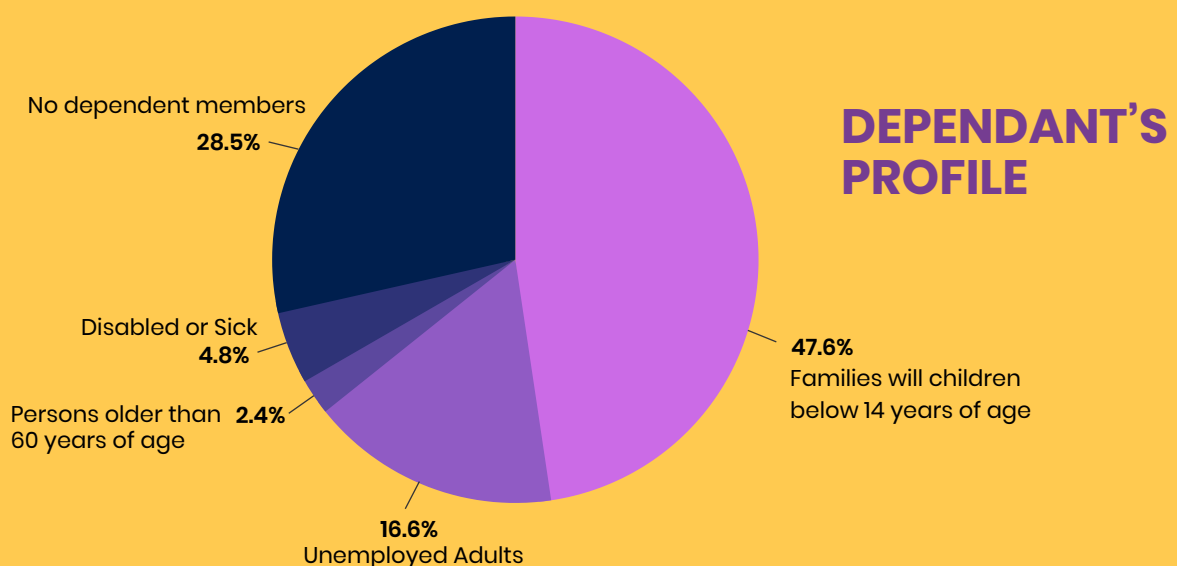
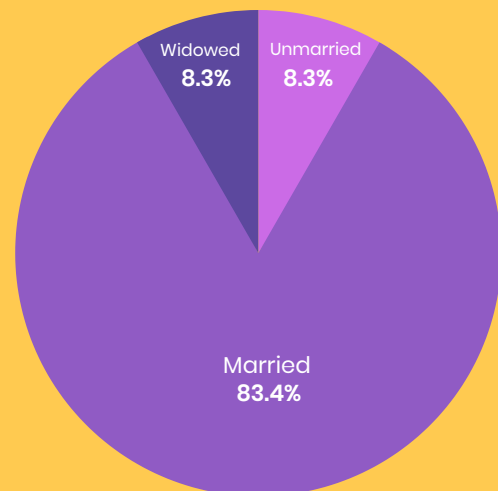
⁸See <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1607911>

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

AGE GROUPS



MARITAL STATUS



Respondent Areas: Haiderpur, Pitampura, Bawana, Rohini, Shahbad Dairy, and Dwarka.

IMPACT ON PAID WORK

The respondents indicated that they were **severely impacted** with the COVID-19 lockdown. All of them experienced enormous reduction in income mainly as a result of **loss of paid work** during the lock down, close to **39%** could not find alternative paid work due to lack of mobility enforced during the lockdown, and about **25%** of respondents even faced **denial of wages** from their employers. During the qualitative interviews, while two respondents were certain of retaining work because of their long association with the contractor, others expressed their fear of not getting work after the lockdown. Given the gendered availability of work in the construction sector, it is very much possible that women might face paucity in the availability of work (KI interviews).

The economic situation of the construction workers was compounded by the fact that not only did they lose paid work; they also **did not receive the promised DBT**. Data from the survey and qualitative interviews indicates that of all the workers registered under the board; only three construction workers had received the promised amount. All the other respondents who did not receive the DBT were those who for some reason or the other **could not renew their registration under the board and as a result had to forfeit the cash benefit**. Every year, the worker has to provide a certificate of having continued to work as construction worker for at least 90 days in a year with an annual contribution of 20 rupees to the cess. The registration process has now been digitized requiring an updated AADHAR Card which many workers do not have. The labour officers during the times of verification have their own biases as to who “looks” like a construction worker. These **discriminatory practices** are then coupled by an intimidating way of having a conversation with the worker. Some women also expressed how they were occupied with other significant problems and could not go for a renewal. All this makes the **process of registration and its annual renewal a daunting process** more so in the case of women workers who may have lesser exposure than male construction workers (KI interviews).

Furthermore, lifting the lockdown would **not ensure similar work opportunities for everyone in the construction sector** (KI interview). For instance, workers who are engaged in painting might face discrimination as people would not allow them into their homes so soon. Moreover, one of the respondents raised the issue that construction workers are already discriminated against. She said **‘rich people already hate us, now how will they let us enter their houses’**. Thus, it is to be noted that loss of paid work as a result of the lockdown is being experienced beyond the economic realm.



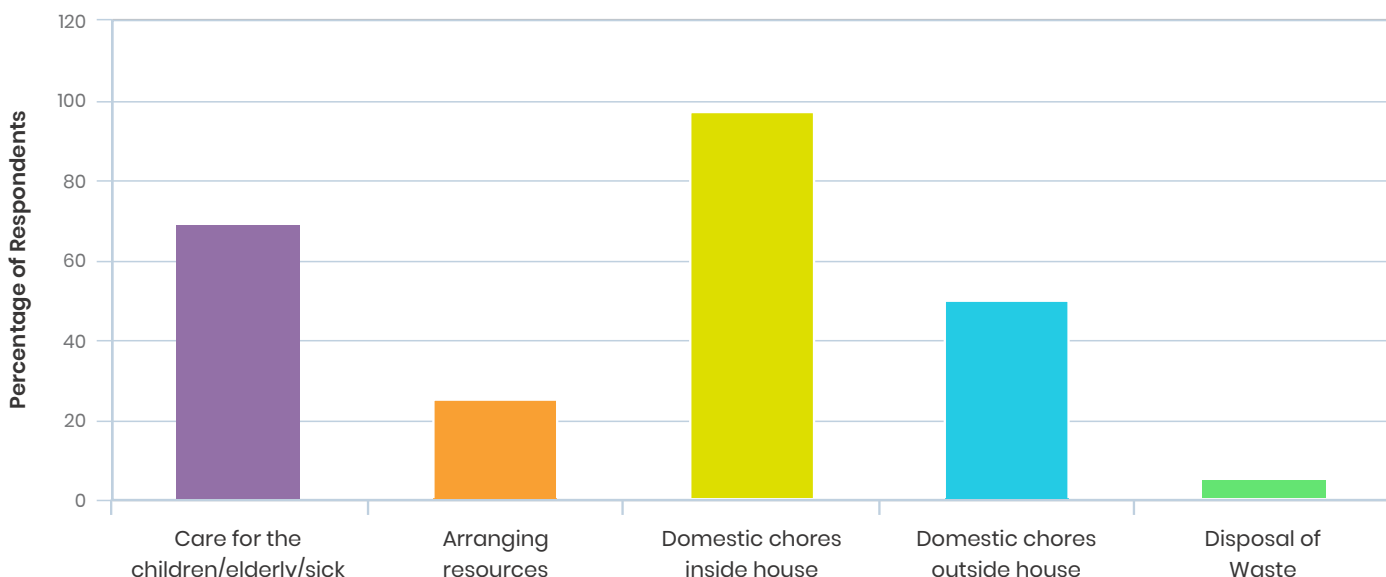
Furthermore, women workers also felt the impact of the lockdown on their individual selves. Qualitative interviews with few women indicated that they have **not been feeling good** after the lockdown. One of the respondents said ‘it feels bad to sit at home, I feel lethargic’. They complained of lassitude and body pain as the nature of physical activity has changed. Another respondent said, ‘there is no energy in my hands and feet’. A respondent, who was recently widowed, was on the verge of completing her registration for widow pension when the lockdown was suddenly announced. With five daughters to support and no financial support from the government, she shared her **mental stress and worries arising from an uncertain future**.

IMPACT ON UNPAID WORK

Besides the emotional strain of being locked down in close physical proximity living in small quarters, our data suggests that the respondents are experiencing a sudden increase in the unpaid care responsibilities for the household. As noted in the table below, women are experiencing an increase in their work burden inside the household, followed by providing care for the children and dependent adults of the family.

The burden felt was higher, when no other family member contributed to unpaid work as indicated by about **64%** respondents in our survey. Arranging essential resources, especially food, has become an extra burden for women during the lockdown, due to long queues at the ration provision shops or food distribution centres run either by the state or civil society organisations.

Figure 2: Which of the unpaid care work responsibilities has significantly increased during the lockdown?



One of the KI's working in Dwarka area reported that men can be seen loitering around in the area and playing cards. Another respondent said that she could not allow her husband and children to do household chores work when she is at home. This undoubtedly indicated the gendered nature of roles men and women were expected to perform. Socially, women were expected to look after the family, and thus the lockdown has meant an exponential increase in their unpaid work responsibilities.

IMPACT ON ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Our findings show that construction workers have had difficulties in procuring essential food items due to job and income loss. More than **90%** of the respondents are dependent on the Public Distribution System. It is to be noted that the respondents are accessing more than one option to get food hence; along with PDS people are also significantly dependent on non PDS sources of food by the government such as Community Kitchens, cooked food in the school, ration through e-coupons.

However, PDS might not be sufficient to ensure healthy food for construction workers. Amidst no savings, they are finding it difficult to purchase any vegetable. As one of the respondents said, 'we are roasting potatoes and tomatoes on the stove and eating it'. Our findings suggest that there is also a difficulty in procuring fuel and water for the purpose of cooking.

Figure 3: Sources of Obtaining food since the lockdown

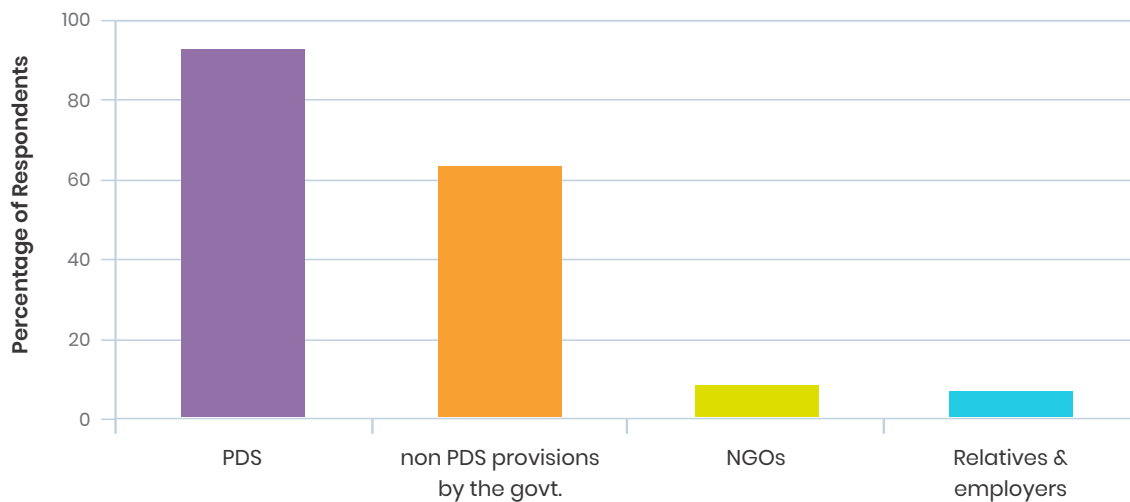
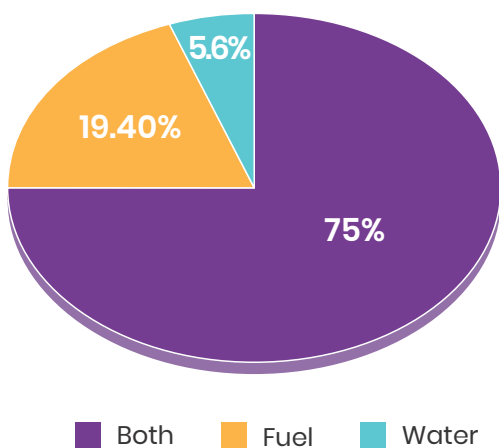
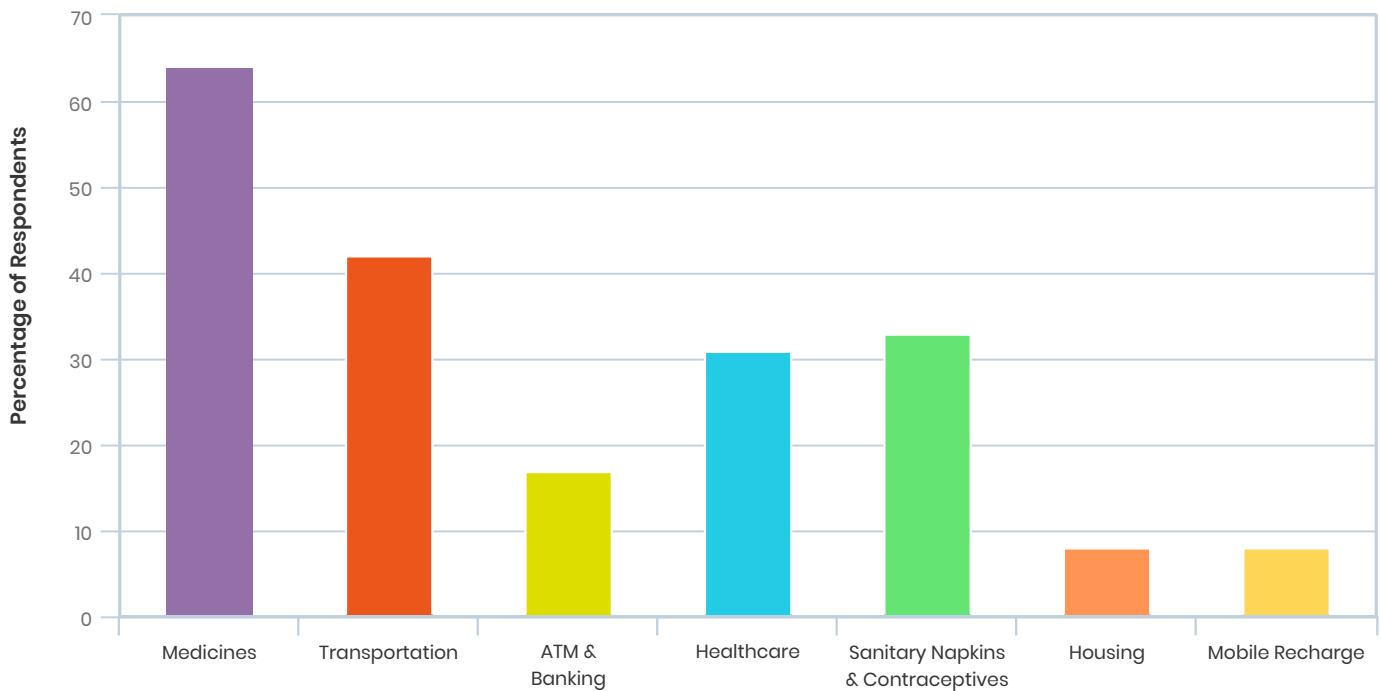


Figure 4: Availability of fuel and water



One of the KIs reported that the lines at the school and for ration for non ration card holders are long in Dwarka Area. **People have to stand in a queue for long hours (sometimes they have to stand in the queue from 3:00 am) and that also might not ascertain that they will get the food.** Secondly, because of long queues there is always a possibility of social distancing norms being flouted. This often results in police disciplining the people and at worse, throwing them out of the line. The quality of the food being served in the school and the community kitchen also seems to be questionable. Moreover, earlier because of the job they had fixed timings to have their meals but now people have it at odd times or skip one of the meals due to unavailability of food (KI interviews and Qualitative interviews with workers).

Figure 5: Difficulties in Accessing Essential Services



It has also been difficult for the respondents to access the essential services as the above graph shows. Around 1/3rd of our respondents reported that they are having difficulty in obtaining sanitary napkins and contraceptives. The Government of India did not include sanitary napkins in the list of essential goods for the first time. It was only when the list was updated, sanitary napkins featured in the list. It is also difficult for people to access healthcare services and essential medicines. Shortage of water for the purpose of washing was being faced by over **27%** respondents, but a higher percentage of respondents, i.e. over **80%** felt a shortage of cleaning essentials such as soaps and sanitizers. Only two soaps are given per family for a month at the state run provision stores, which is not enough for a family of over 4 members. Over **72%** respondents also indicated unavailability of masks to use when accessing public areas or when waiting in long queues. Respondents from Dwarka reported that people were being discouraged to access health services out of the fear of contracting the virus.

COPING MECHANISMS

Given the critical situation of paid work, unpaid work, and access to resources and services, the women construction workers in our study have used different ways to cope with the prevalent conditions. However, it is disheartening to note that an overwhelming **72%** of respondents pointed out that they are finding it difficult to manage in these dire circumstances. About **39%** respondents received help in ration or food from either a state or a non-governmental source, but a few have also had to incur debt during this period. The qualitative interviews suggested that although the landlords did not pressurize to pay the monthly rent, but they are in debt as they would have to pay a cumulative rent amount once the lockdown is lifted. Despite these circumstances, the respondents reported that they could not have gone back to their villages in Rajasthan or Bihar, as they had no assets such as land or any other source of income in the village. As such, these respondents are completely dependent on work which would eventually be available on the construction sites in Delhi.

Figure 6: How have you Managed the Daily Expenses?

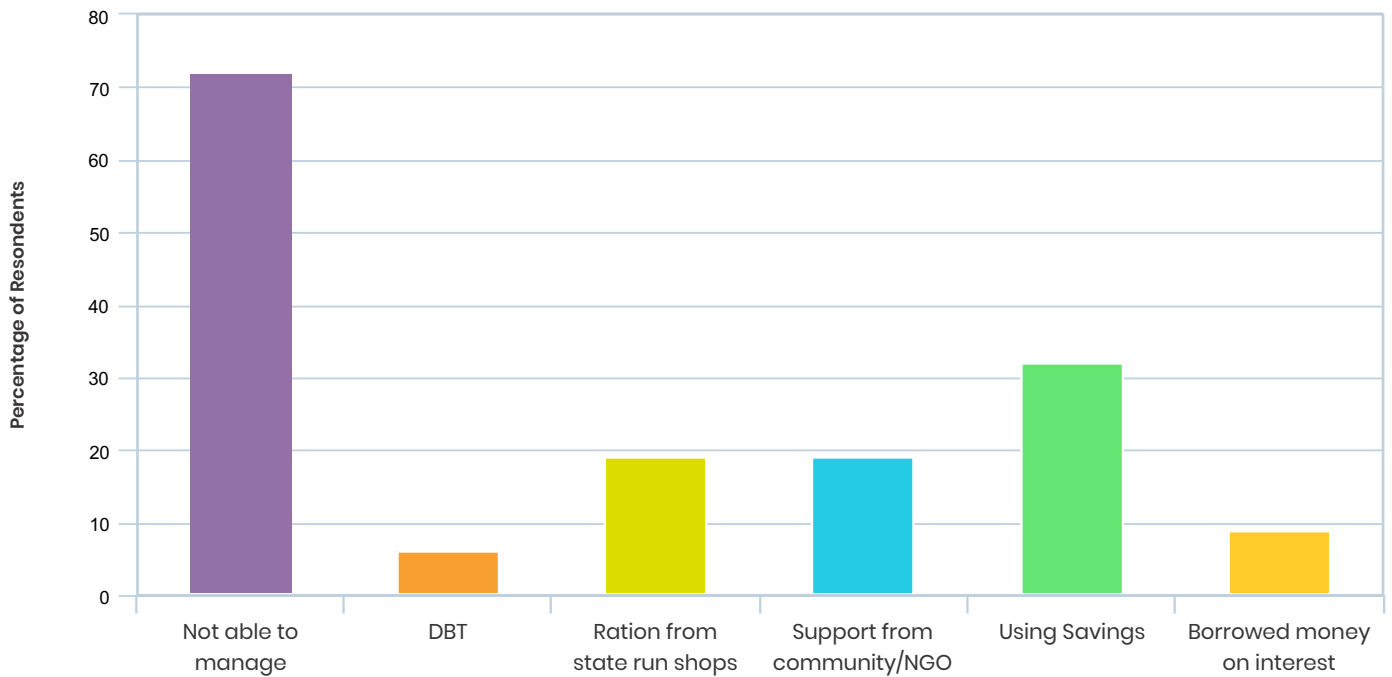
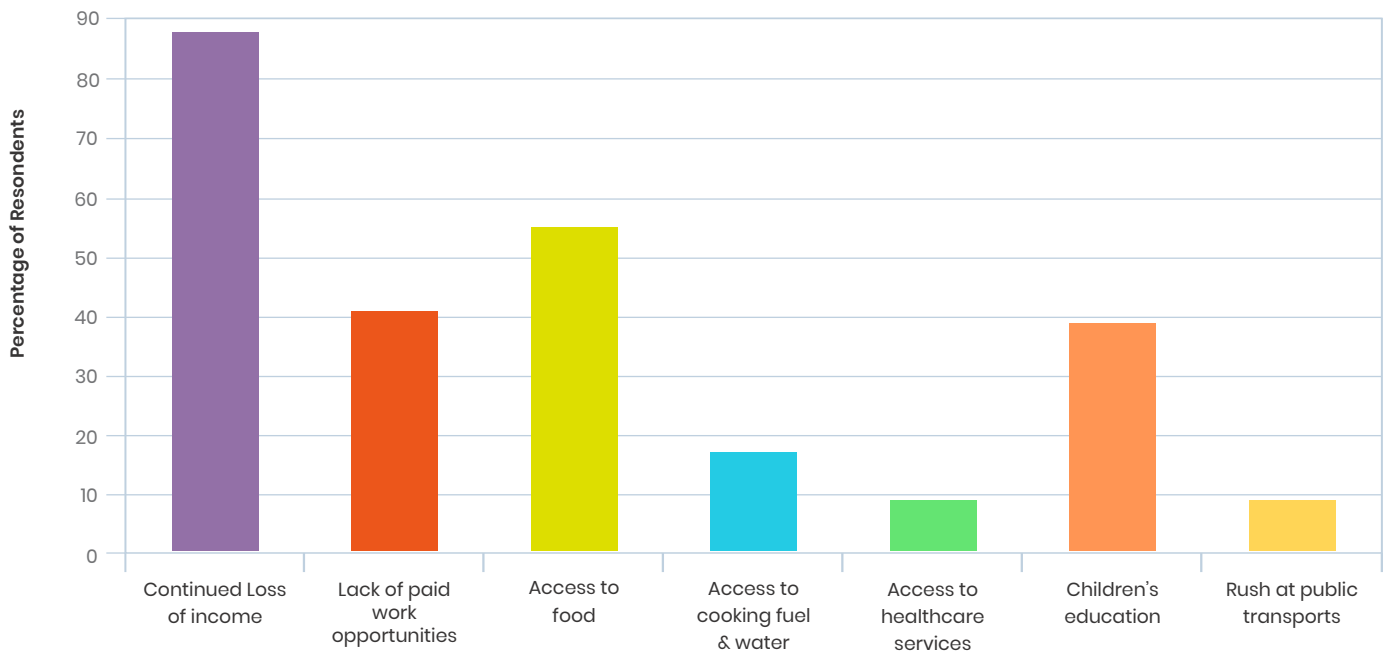


Figure 7: What would be your immediate concerns once the lockdown is lifted?



With respect to the COVID-19 and following the required preventive measures, respondents suggested that they are able to follow social distancing as they are mostly confined to their homes except when they have to carry out chores outside the home or access essential resources for the family. Majority of respondents received information on preventive measures either through the television or family, friends and relatives. The immediate concerns of respondents for the post lockdown period are centered on finding paid work and earning income, and there were continued concerns related to access to food. Children have also been out of school, and have not had access to online classes, thus the parents fear continued loss in their school education. Workers are also worried that when schools reopen they may not be able to incur school related expenses due to the uncertainties associated with paid work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Only those construction workers who renewed their registration under DBOCW in the current year have received the DBT, depriving many of the registered workers who could not renew. As pointed out by the National Campaign Committee (NCC), 30th April 2020 circular¹⁰, there are 20 states in India that have provided DBT to all registered workers irrespective of their renewal state. It is requested that Delhi follows suit with immediate effect.

Given that many construction workers are not registered, it needs to be ensured that all the construction workers across the country are registered immediately as per the Supreme Court judgment (CWP318 of 2006)¹¹ directing the governments to bring about uniformity and portability in registration procedures across the different states.

The availability of BOCW Cess funds for construction workers has had its limitations, thus it is important that the 'State Disaster Management Fund' is used to reach out to all workers immediately, irrespective of their registration under the DBOCW.

Women construction workers are often malnourished and this lockdown has left them with a loss of income and a significant increase in their unpaid work responsibilities. Government needs to devise ways of distributing nutritious food and supplements, without necessitating waiting in long queues that defeat the purpose of the lock down for social distancing.

There is a need to pay special attention to already existing gendered availability of work and wage gap in the construction sector. The government needs to ensure that some form of livelihood opportunity for women. Also, it needs to be ensured that cash benefits are made available even after the lockdown.

It is important that the government pays attention to single income families, or female headed families as they may face greater vulnerabilities emanating from financial and social pressures.

Educational needs of the children cannot be ignored, as continued loss of education will lead to a larger number of children dropping out from school.

Access to health services needs to be eased, as there are many other health conditions not necessarily associated with COVID-19 but need immediate medical attention, which importantly includes women's reproductive and sexual health.

¹⁰National Campaign Committee for Central Legislation (NCC - CL) On Construction Labour, Circular dated 30th April 2020. www.nirmana.org

¹¹Supreme Court of India, Civil Original Jurisdiction, Writ Petition (Civil) No. 318 of 2006. Available at <http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/construction%20workers%20Supreme%20Court%20Judgement%202018.pdf>

METHODOLOGY NOTE

This study on women construction workers is one of the five micro study series on the impact of Covid-19 national lockdown on lives of women informal workers in Delhi. For this study, ISST partnered with Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangham (NMPS) to conduct telephonic surveys with 36 women construction workers living in Delhi between, 23 - 30 April 2020. The ISST team also conducted telephonic qualitative interviews with two key informants and five women workers, based on access. All data collecting tools were translated in Hindi and consent was taken prior to any data collection.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to Mr. Subhash Bhatnagar for enriching this study with his valuable insights and guidance. We would like to thank Chinmayee and Nisha for their grounded inputs and help in carrying out the surveys. And most importantly, we would like to thank the women construction workers who gave us time and shared their experiences despite their difficult life conditions.

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This report has been written by Mubashira Zaidi and Prateek, Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi, May 2020.



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