

Institute of Social Studies Trust



Emerging from the Lockdown: Insights from Women Domestic Workers' Lives in Delhi

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Abstract/Key Findings

Using a mixed-methods approach of telephone survey and in-depth interviews with stakeholders and women workers, this study aims to assess the impact that the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown had on women domestic workers and map the way their situation changed once the lockdown was lifted. It finds that the lockdown had a severe impact on work and income, with almost 80% of the respondents stating that they experienced job loss during that period. The study also highlights that even when the lockdown was lifted, workers were not able to return to work immediately due to fear of disease among their employers. For those who were able to get back to work, there was a significant decline in the number of houses where they were able to get employment compared to the number of houses where they used to work prior to the pandemic. The study also highlights the new Covid-19 norms that workers now have to follow when they go for work and argues that the paid work situation for these workers remains far from what it used to be before the lockdown was imposed. In terms of unpaid work, the report finds that workers now bear an increased burden in both inside household work as well as caring for young children. They were found to be under extreme stress due to the financial crisis that they were suffering and were also found to be struggling with accessing essential goods and services including, food, water, fuel, children's education and healthcare services for diseases other than Covid-19. The study recommends that as immediate measures domestic workers should be provided with free ration kits until their paid work situation stabilises. It also recommends that the government must fast-track the registration of domestic workers to the Unorganized Workers Social Security Board as well as bring out a minimum wage notification for the workers to ensure that they are protected from social and economic vulnerabilities.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Across the globe, nearly 55 million domestic workers are at a significant risk of losing their jobs and income due to the pandemic and the consequent lockdown imposed by different countries to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus (ILO estimate June 2020)ⁱ. Of these, almost 37 million are women workers and 76% of them are employed in the informal sector, meaning that the majority are those who have no safety net to fall back on. In India, too, fear of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the stringent lockdown that the Government of India imposed from 24 March 2020 until 25 May 2020 has severely impacted domestic workers in terms of both livelihood and income. The very nature of this work, which requires the worker to enter the employer's household, has gone against these workers, because fear of contracting the disease has pushed many employers to turn their back on their long-serving employees. The Rapid Assessment Studies carried out by the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) in April-May 2020 to assess the impact of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown on women workers in Delhi found that 83% of the surveyed domestic workers had already experienced severe to moderate economic crises at the time of the survey.ⁱⁱ They were not only suffering from immense stress regarding the uncertainty surrounding their paid work but were also now having to manage an increased burden of unpaid work in their own households with the additional strain of arranging for food during the lockdown. Their non-recognition and invisibility deprived them of any government relief package or benefits.

As a follow-up to the previous study, this study aims to understand and assess the impact that the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown had on women domestic workers and map how their situation changed once the lockdown was lifted. It aims to highlight the significant changes that may have occurred to their paid and unpaid work situations and discuss the coping mechanisms that they may be adopting to deal with such changes.

Methodology

ISST partnered with Chetanalaya and Saathi Centre (a community outreach programme of ISST) to understand the impact of the pandemic and the initiation of the lockdown and unlocking phases on the livelihoods of women domestic workers. The quantitative survey was conducted at the beginning of the study and the qualitative survey tool was designed specifically to address the gaps identified during the quantitative survey. The quantitative data was collected through a telephone survey with 65 women domestic workers using Google forms and all data collecting tools were translated into Hindi. The sample of respondents was selected in a purposive way and the results are not representative of the states or the country. ISST researchers conducted six telephone interviews (four with women domestic workers and two with stakeholders) based on access. Both the quantitative and qualitative surveys were started only after clear information regarding the purpose was provided to the respondents and their consent was obtained. The study has maintained strict anonymity of all worker respondents who agreed to be part of this study. Participation in this study was voluntary and during the data collection process, respondents were under no obligation to complete the survey/interview if they had any hesitation or reluctance at any point in the data collection. The survey team took care to schedule a call at time that was convenient for the women worker for a conversation and all precautions were taken during data collection to avoid undue distress to the respondents and her family. No questions were asked that may hurt the sentiments or discriminate against any person based on caste, class, religion, race, gender, sexual preferences.

Demographic Profile

One of the most feminised sectors of urban employment, domestic work, refers to a range of activities performed by the worker – mostly referred to as ‘maid’ – within the private space of the employer’s house, in exchange of a remuneration that may be in the form of cash or kind or both. The activities may include dusting, sweeping, cleaning utensils, laundry, cooking, child and elderly care and/or other work that is seen important for the smooth functioning of the employer’s house or which the employer may ask/demand (without extra pay) from the worker during her work hours. However, the range and number of activities that a worker may have to do in a particular employer’s household and the remuneration she may get for that depends largely on her ability to negotiate and bargain and, hence, varies from worker to worker.

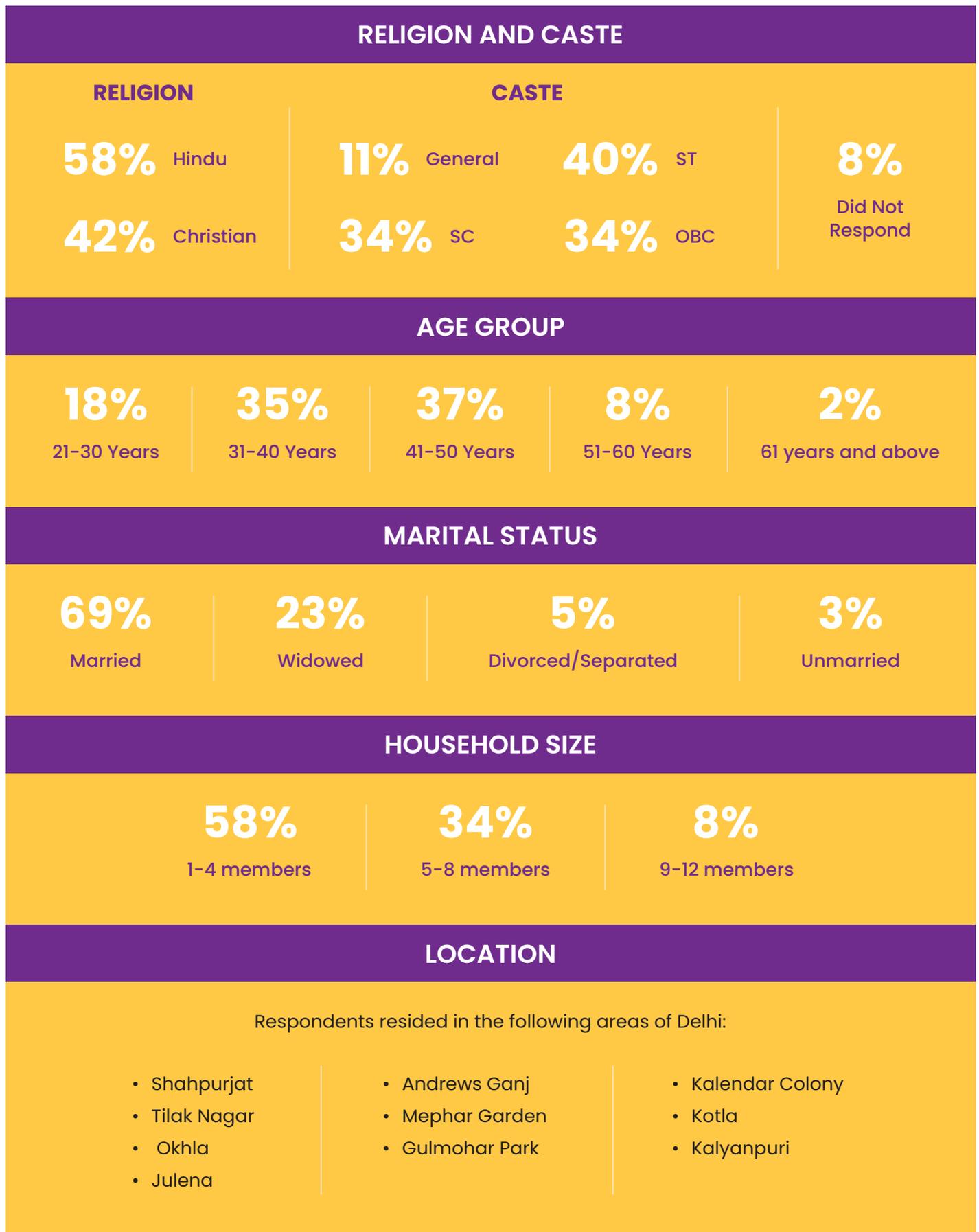
Domestic workers can be categorised as a ‘part-timer’ or a full-timer’ and also as a ‘live-in worker’ or a ‘live-out’ worker. While a ‘part time’ worker is always a ‘live out’ worker, meaning she does not stay at the employer’s home and works for fixed number of hours, a ‘full time’ worker may or may not be a ‘live in’ worker. Full-timers usually work in a single employer’s household and can either be a 12-hour ‘live out’ worker or a 24 hour ‘live in’ worker. The part-timer, on the other hand, works in more than one household and though they are a ‘part timer’ from the perspective of the employer – as they are only spending 1-2 hours in each household – their total working hours, including travel time from one house to another, may be equivalent to the number of hours a full-time worker is devoting in another sector. Part-timers reside with their own families in Jhuggis or low income colonies mostly near the colonies or residential areas of their employers and, unlike full-time domestic workers who reside with their employers, they have to juggle their paid domestic work with the unpaid care work of their own households. Though there has been a significant increase in the number of ‘live-in’ workers in the past two decades, Neetha (2013)ⁱⁱⁱ notes that the main upsurge in the number of domestic workers has mainly been due to part-timers. The middle class continues to prefer part-time workers due to their cheap labour as well as the ease of hiring and firing them. Further, with part-timers there is no obligation on the part of the employer to provide any board and lodging.

It is this group of part-time domestic workers within the domestic work sector that has been worst affected by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown because they are viewed as ‘corona carriers’. Elizabeth Devi of the Community for Social Change and Development said, ‘Employers think that the workers are carriers of corona since the places where they are staying social distancing is difficult; they are doubtful if they are taking precautions properly (Key Informant Interview (KII), November 2020). Anushikha from Chetanalaya reiterated this opinion and added, ‘Employers are preferring live-in workers; but every domestic worker cannot become a live-in worker because of their own familial situation; therefore, many of them who were working earlier are sitting home without any work. There is dearth of work; number of domestic workers who were working earlier has come down tremendously,’ (KII, November 2020).

This study, thus, specifically focuses on part-time domestic workers of Delhi who, prior to the pandemic, were employed in more than one household, doing a fixed number of activities for a fixed number of hours.

The demographic profile of these respondents is given in Table 1. We find that 58% of the workers are Hindus while 42% are Christians. 34% of the total respondents are from the Scheduled Caste and 40% are from Scheduled Tribes. Only 11% of the respondents belong to the General category. The majority of the respondents are married and belong to the age group of 31 to 50 years. A significant percentage of the respondents were also found to be widowed. In terms of household size, 58% respondents on an average had a household size of 4 members while 34% had 5 to 8 members in their household.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the respondents

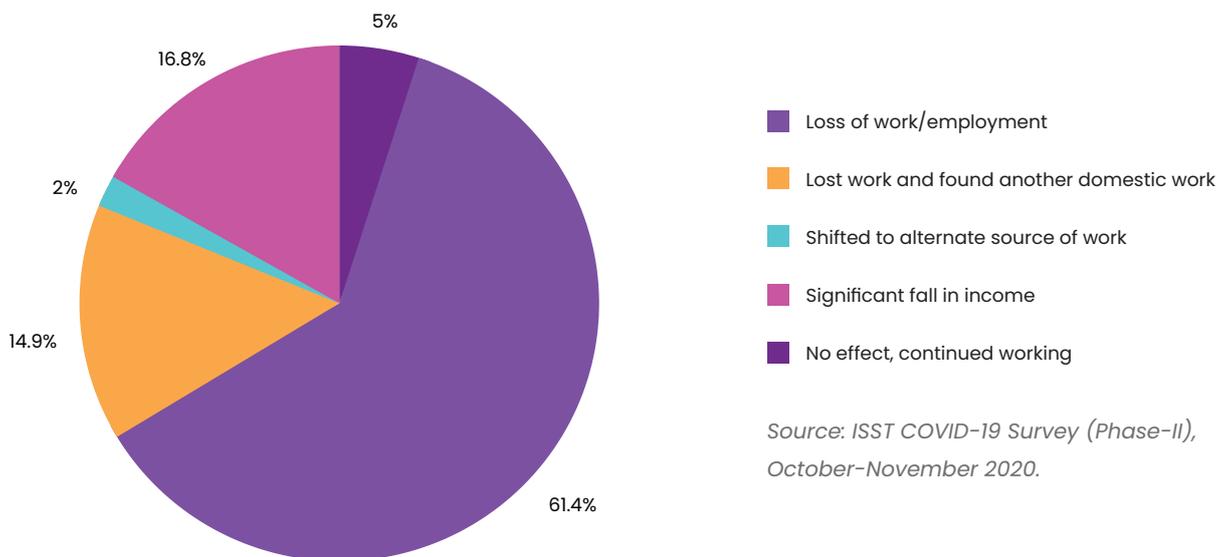


Source: ISST Covid-19 Survey (Phase-II), October-November, 2020.

Impact on Paid Work

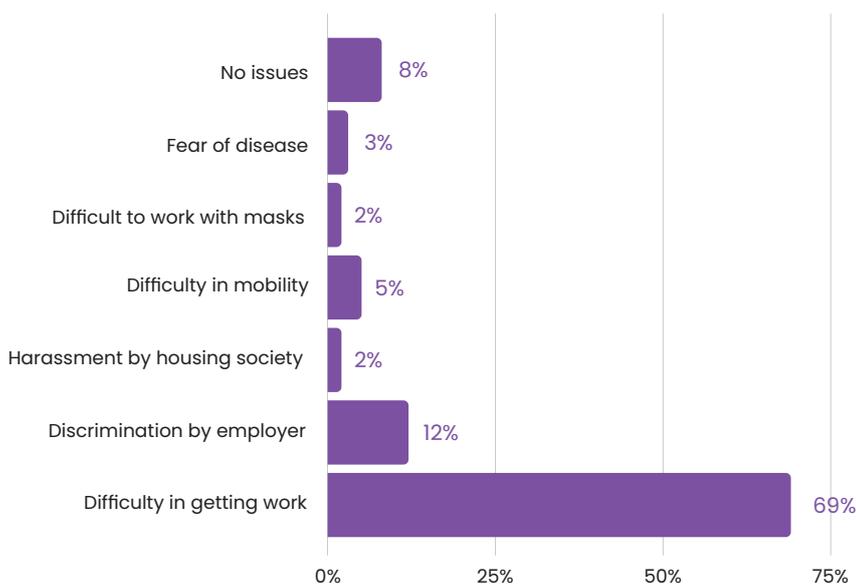
The survey showed that the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown had a significant impact on the livelihood and income of the domestic workers. Around 79% respondents stated that they suffered job loss due to the pandemic and 17% stated that they suffered severe loss in income during this period. Only 15% of the respondents reported that they had been able to start working again as domestic workers. However, the paid work situation of these workers remains far from what it was in days before the lockdown.

Fig 1: Impact of Covid-19 induced Lockdown on Livelihood



Qualitative interviews revealed that even after the lockdown was lifted, domestic workers were not able to get back to work immediately. In the survey, 69% respondents stated that finding work was their main challenge after the lockdown was lifted (Figure 2).

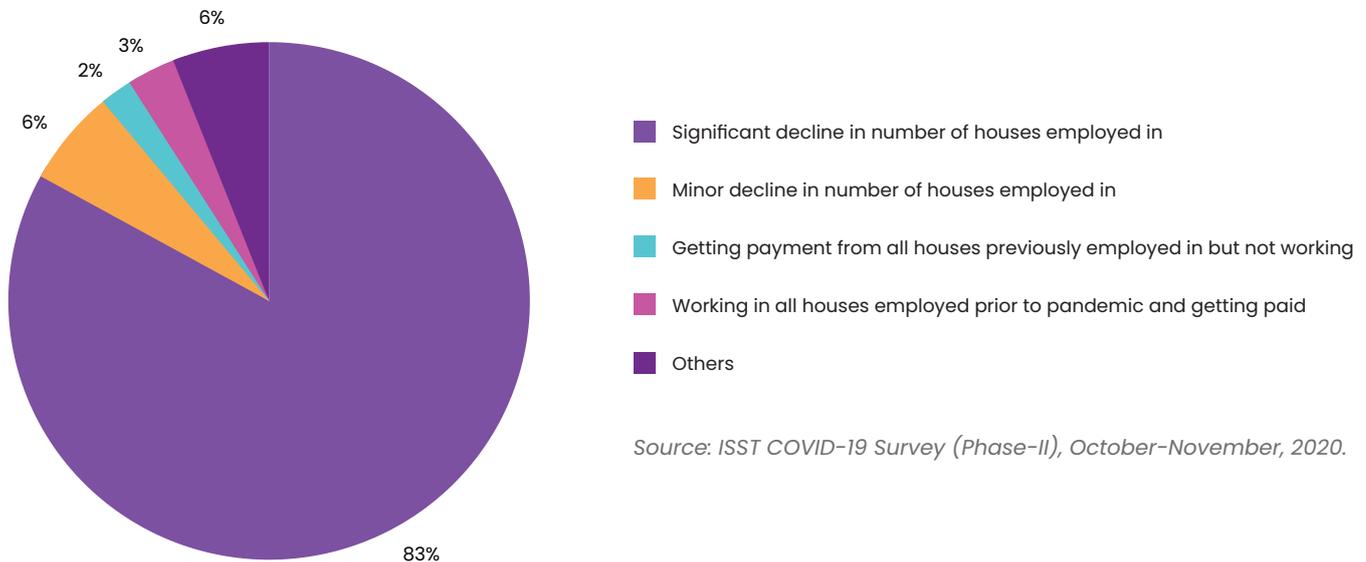
Figure 2: Challenges in Post-Lockdown Period



Source: ISST Covid-19 Survey (Phase-II), October–November, 2020.

The workers were able to find work only from September but in fewer houses than they did prior to the pandemic. While 83% respondents stated that they were experiencing a significant decline in the number of houses they were employed in, only 6% stated that they were working in all the houses where they were previously employed and were also getting paid regularly (Figure 3).

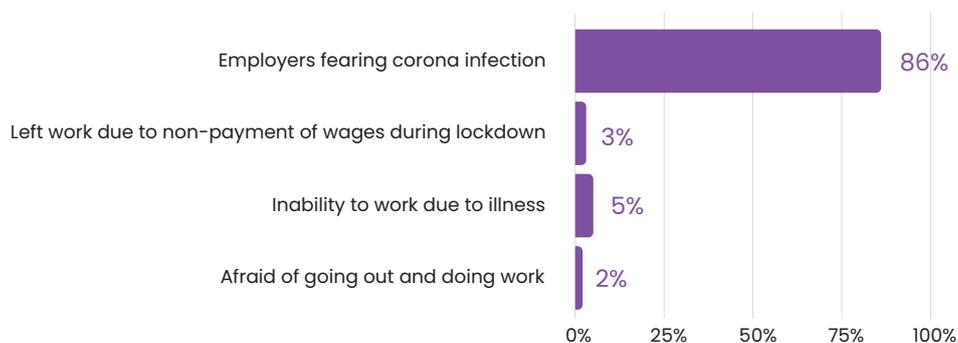
Fig 3: Paid Work Situation in Post Lockdown Period



Source: ISST COVID-19 Survey (Phase-II), October–November, 2020.

KII interviews revealed that ‘employers are now preferring only live-in workers as part-time workers come from their homes to three four houses where they work, which means it involves lot of travelling and meeting other people under present situation of social distancing’ (Anushikha, Chetanalaya, November 2020). Elizabeth (KII, Nov 2020) informed us that in Gurgaon some employers were getting their full-time workers tested for Covid-19 and if the test was negative and she agreed to stay with them, they were keeping her as a live-in worker. Thus, clearly fear of the pandemic came across as the main reason for the significant decline in employment of domestic workers. In the survey too, 86% of the respondents said that employers’ fear of Covid-19 was the main reason why they were reluctant to hire domestic workers (Figure 4). However, the survey also showed non-payment of wages during the lockdown period as another important factor why some workers (3%) did not go back to their previous employers. Elizabeth in her interview stated that many employers were hesitant to call back the workers because they had not paid them for the lockdown period (KII interview, November 2020). She stated that most workers were taking on new employment rather than going back to their previous employers.

Figure 4: Reasons for Decline in No. of Households Employed in



Source: ISST Covid-19 Survey (Phase-II), October–November, 2020.

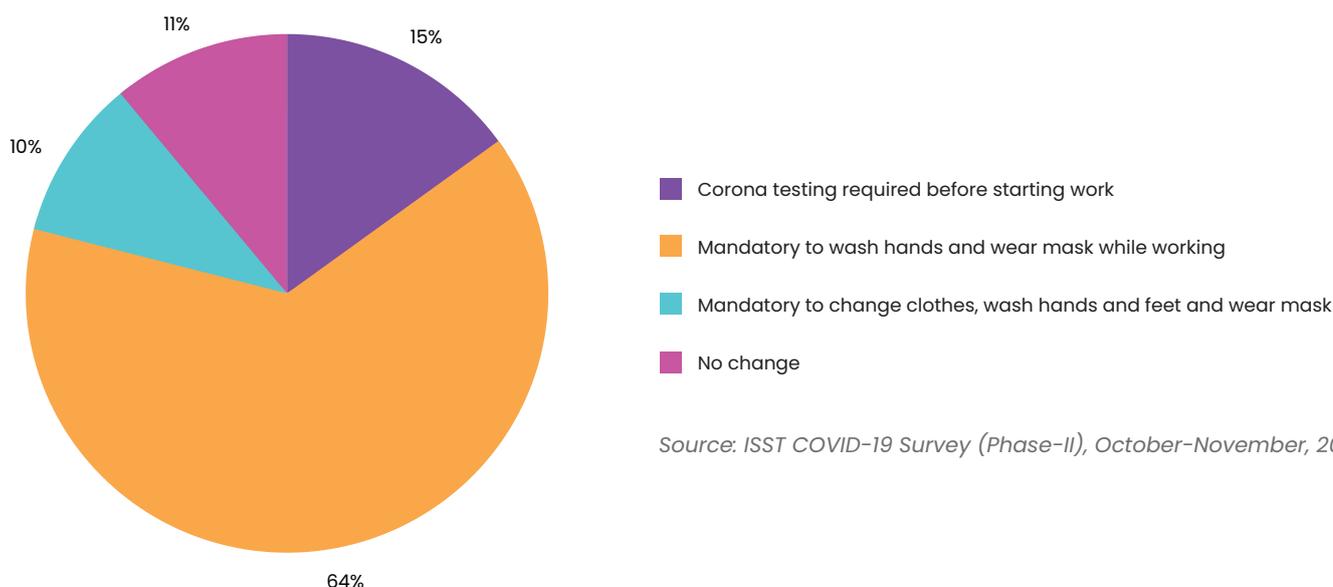
Anushikha from Chetanalaya informed us that most employers only paid salaries for the month of March and asked the workers not to come until further notice. During their own survey just after the lockdown, they found that only a negligible number of domestic workers had received some help from their employers. Most informed that their employers had not even called to find out how they were or offered any support. The workers stated that they felt that even after serving for years, they could never become part of their employer's household. Interviews with women workers revealed similar sentiments. Anuradha, a domestic worker, was working in two houses prior to the lockdown. She last received Rs 1,200 and Rs 1,500 as wages from the two houses for the month of March after which she was told not to come until she was called back. One employer gave her Rs. 500 twice during the lockdown period but has told her that she will deduct that money from her wages once she resumes work. Anuradha lives with her husband, three sons and two daughters. Currently, both she and her husband are unemployed. Only her second son gets work once in a while with which they run their household.

Like Anuradha, Mala worked in two houses prior to the pandemic. Her employers too gave her a salary only until March and asked her not to come until further notice. She resumed work again in September but at much lesser wages than what she was earning before.

Elizabeth (KII) also told us in her interview that many employers were now even trying to pay lower wages because they realised that domestic workers had no work and hence were in no position to negotiate for adequate wages. Thus, even though some workers were now able to get work, their income had reduced drastically.

Fear of the pandemic also changed the work environment of most domestic workers. Those who were able to get back to work informed us that they were now asked to follow new norms. While 15% stated that they were asked to get tested for Covid-19, 64% of the respondents currently working stated that it was mandatory for them to wash their hands and wear a mask all the time while working in their employer's household. 10% are also now asked to change their clothes along with washing their hands and feet and wearing a mask (Figure 5). This was borne out in the qualitative interviews with workers. Sudha, who has been called back to only one house out of the 4 where she used to work prior to the pandemic stated, '...as soon as I reach the doorstep of my employer, I have to sanitise myself. I have to sanitise my hands, my body by putting sanitiser on my clothes and even my mobile phone. It's a four-room house so when I am working in one room, the family shifts to the other...' (Worker interview, November 2020).

Figure 5: Change in work environment due to pandemic

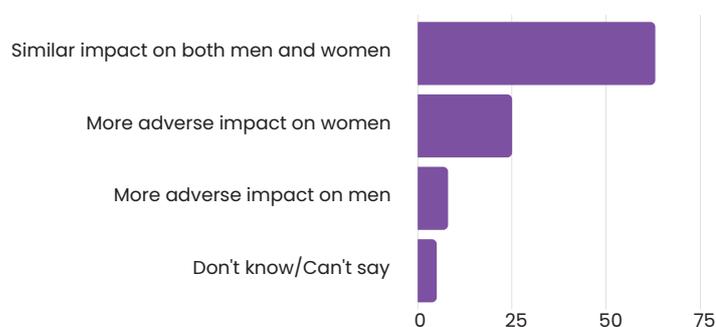


The survey found that for most workers it was difficult to shift to an alternate source of work. Only 2% stated that they had shifted to alternate work (Figure 1). Elizabeth (KII) stated that it was difficult for workers to shift to another line of work because it required investment. Since most workers had no savings, it was difficult for them to think of an

alternative. Anushikha also stated that very few could venture into alternate sources of livelihood like selling tea or doing home-based piece-rate work since all sectors had been impacted significantly by the pandemic and the lockdown. Unpaid care work was highlighted as a factor that women had to consider while choosing a livelihood option. Domestic worker Anuradha clearly stated in her interview that she could not possibly work in a factory or company since she had young children. Domestic work suited her the most and that she would like to continue with it.

In terms of comparing the impact of Covid-19 on male and female workers in general, it was found that while 63% of the survey respondents stated that the pandemic and the lockdown had a similar impact on both men and women workers, 25% were of the view that women were more adversely impacted mainly because their mobility was limited (Figure 6). Qualitative interviews with KIIs also revealed that since most men domestic workers work outside the household premises as gardeners, sweepers or security guards in residential complexes, they were able to continue with their work. However, since women workers mostly work inside the household premises, they were more adversely impacted. Also, men were able to switch more easily to alternate work of selling vegetables, or working in malls or offices as guards, sweepers etc., but women workers could not do that as their mobility remains restricted (KII interview, November 2020). Hence, the scope for an alternate work source too remains very narrow for most women domestic workers.

Fig 6: Comparing impact on Men and Women Workers

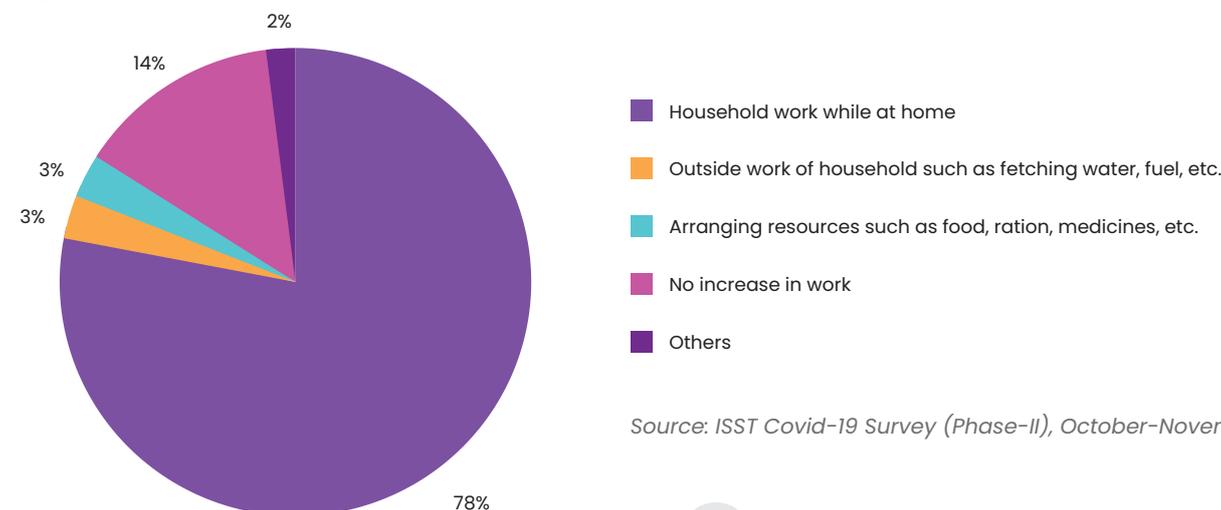


Source: ISST Covid-19 Survey (Phase-II), October–November, 2020.

Impact on Unpaid Work

In terms of the impact on unpaid household work, 78% of the survey respondents highlighted a significant increase in inside household work of cooking and cleaning (Figure 7).

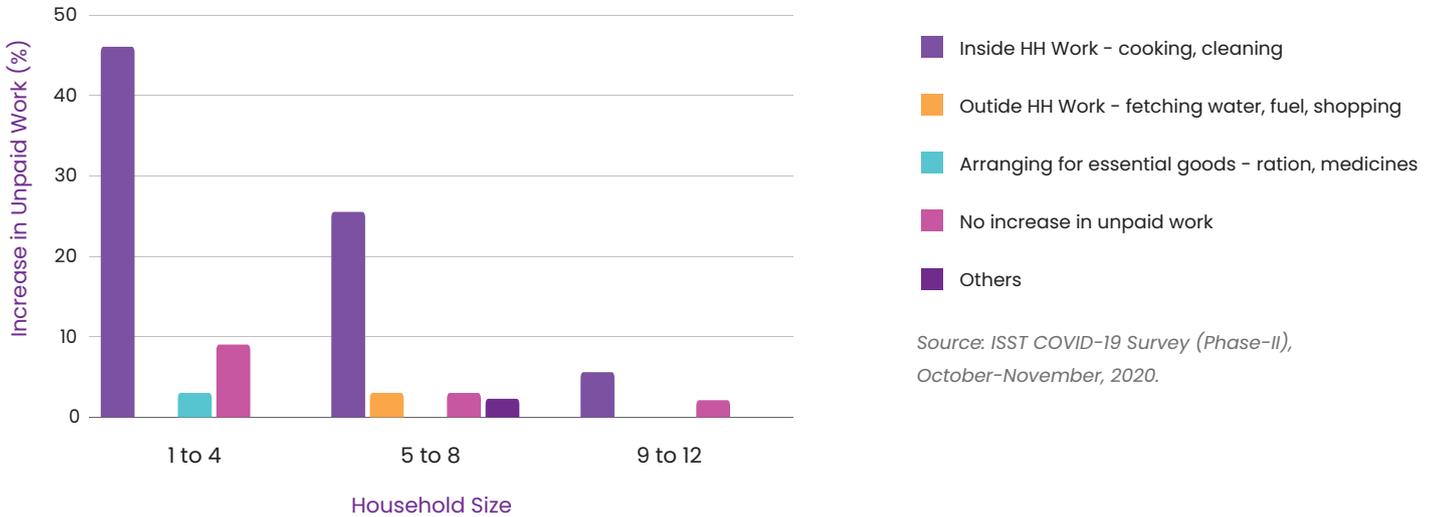
Figure 7: Increase in Unpaid Work Since Lockdown



Source: ISST Covid-19 Survey (Phase-II), October–November, 2020.

Qualitative interviews also revealed that now that most family members were in the house most of the time, which increased the burden of unpaid work inside the household. However, when this increase in unpaid work was compared to household size, it was seen that this burden of unpaid work was experienced by women more in households which had fewer family members than those that had a larger group of people staying together (Figure 8)

Figure 8: Increase in unpaid work by size of household



Source: ISST COVID-19 Survey (Phase-II), October–November, 2020.

Similarly, in terms of care work, the majority of respondents stated a significant increase in child care work. Again when compared to household size, it was seen that the burden of increased care work of all kinds including caring for the elderly, a sick relative or pets was experienced more by women in smaller households than those who lived in larger households (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Increase in unpaid care work

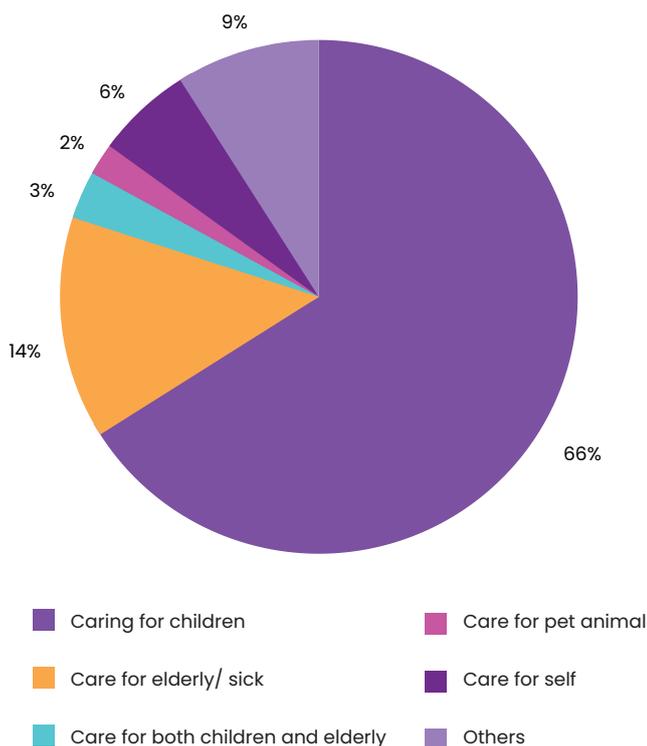
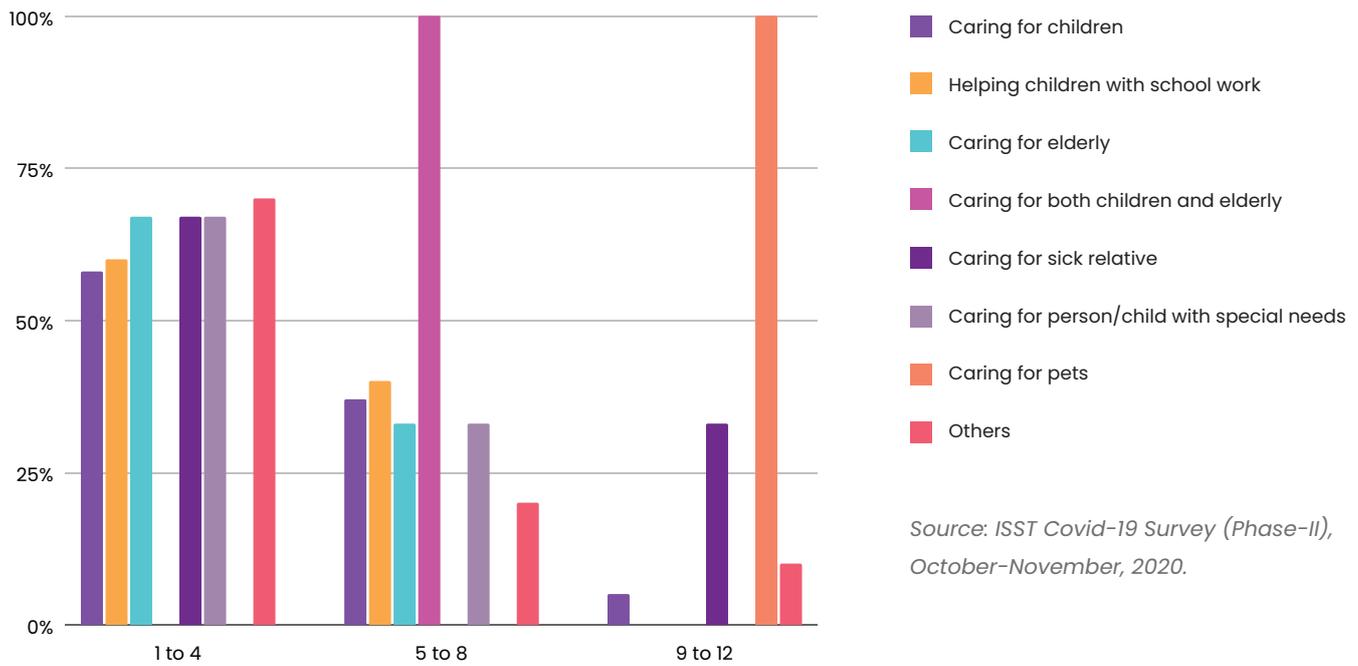
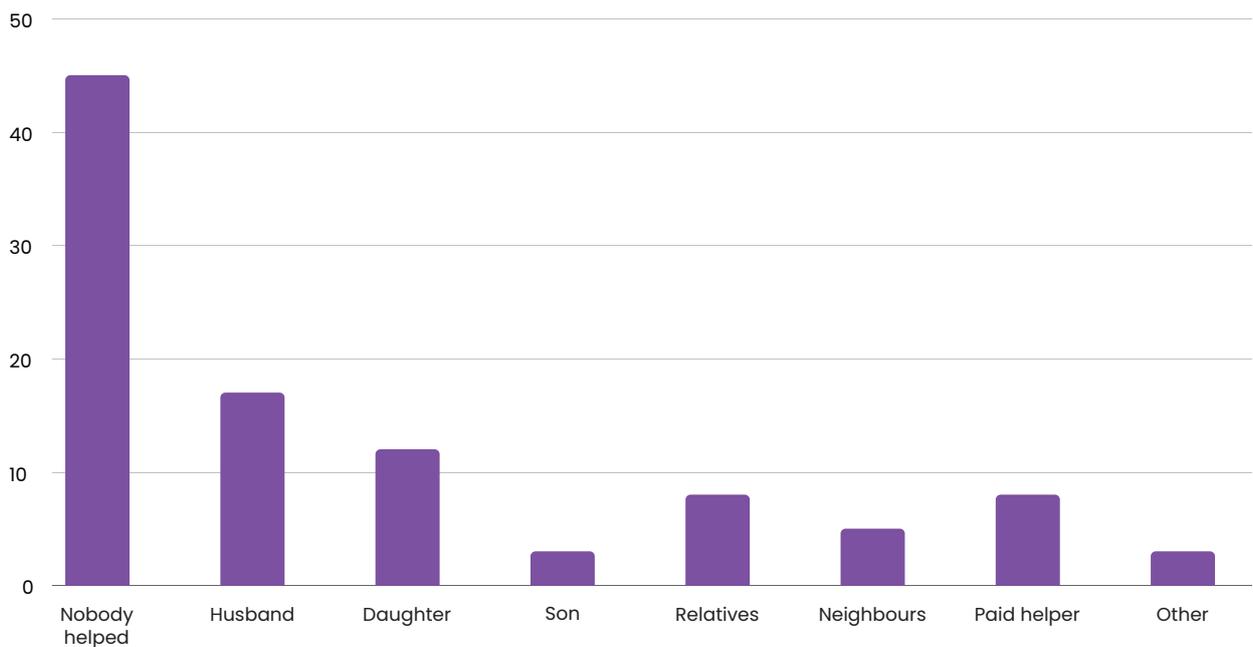


Figure 10: Increase in unpaid care work by size of household



When respondents were asked who helps with unpaid household and care work, 45% respondents stated that nobody helped them in the household, and only 17% stated that they received help from their husbands (Figure 11). This is probably because the majority of respondents who struggled with the burden of unpaid work lived in nuclear families and were mothers to very young children. Thus, the whole burden of unpaid work fell on them with no support system to bank on.

Figure 11: Who helps with Unpaid Work?



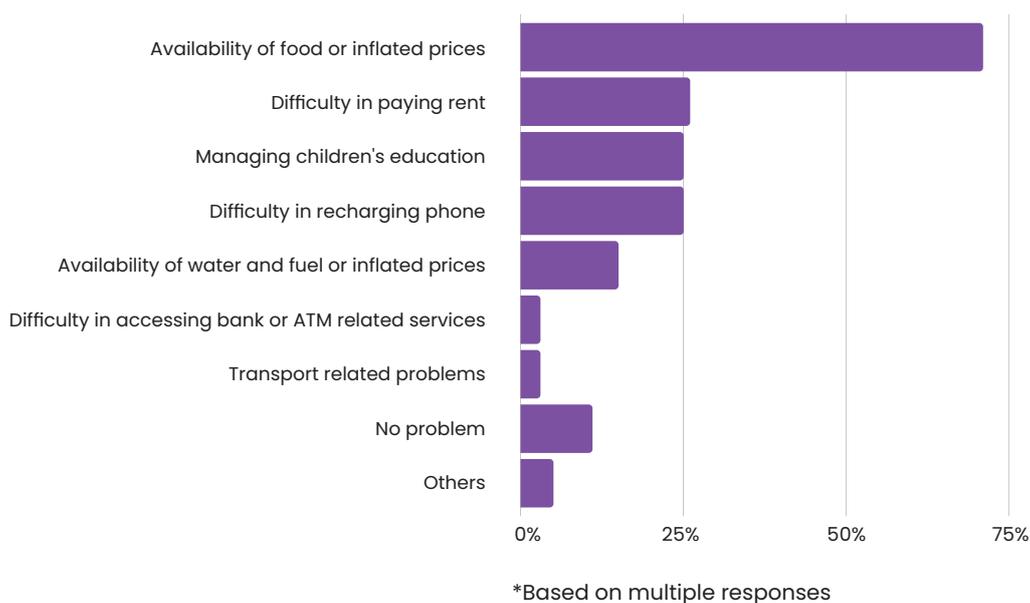
Source: ISST Covid-19 Survey (Phase-II), October–November, 2020.

Both qualitative interviews and the survey also showed that workers who did not specify any increase in unpaid household work as a significant issue were those who mainly had daughters/ daughters-in-law at home to take care of most unpaid work of the household.

Access to Essential Commodities and Services

During the lockdown and even after the lockdown was lifted, workers continued to face challenges in accessing essential commodities and services. The survey highlighted that access to food items, water and fuel was one of the main challenges that most workers were struggling with (Figure 12). Significant reduction in income coupled with high increase in prices made it very difficult for the workers to purchase most items.

Figure 12: Challenges in Accessing Essential Goods and Services



Source: ISST Covid-19 Survey (Phase-II), October–November, 2020.

Qualitative interviews showed that the situation was better during the lockdown when the government and several civil society organisations distributed essential food items for free. Also, the cost of vegetables was lower during the lockdown so workers stated that they were able to manage to some extent. This stopped once the lockdown was lifted. Since most workers do not have a ration card in Delhi, they were not able to procure ration through the subsidized ration shops.

Payment of rent was highlighted as another aspect that workers were struggling with. About 26% of respondents stated that they were finding it difficult to pay rent. One worker during the survey stated, 'Kya khaon, aur kya kiraya doon?' (How do I manage eating and paying rent simultaneously?). Anushikha in her interview mentioned that during the lockdown the government made an announcement on the news and requested house owners not to collect rent during that period; so, many house owners had given relief to their tenants. However, once the lockdown was lifted, they have been demanding rent from these workers because they need it for their own finances.

Workers were also found to be extremely worried about their children's education. The closure of schools and the initiation of online classes for children created another burden because they had to buy a smartphone and re-charge it from time to time. While 25% of respondents identified children's education as a significant challenge, 25% also highlighted re-charging of mobile phones as a matter of concern. Since most of them owned only one mobile phone, their children had to share it; thus, when one was using it, the others had to miss their classes. Also, due to a significant decline in their work and income, many workers had to stop private tuitions for their children. Sudha, mother of two



children aged 13 and 14 years stated, 'Yes, my children are studying. We got a spare smartphone from my husband's friend. During the lockdown, I had to remove my children from tuition classes as I could not afford it and also because of fear of Covid-19. But now that exams are nearing, they insisted on getting tuition so I have again put them back in their respective tutorials.' (Worker interview, November 2020). Anuradha whose younger two children (11 and 8 years) are studying said that she goes to school once a week to get their worksheets and homework and then submits it in school when they have completed it. Another worker Jagruti, a single parent of five daughters, stated that two of her daughters would be appearing for the Class 10 board exam this year and that she had already submitted Rs 1,500 for each as board fees. She stated that all her five daughters are managing with just one phone but are trying hard to continue their education. Thus, it was evident that though workers were worried about providing for their children's education, they were trying their best to ensure that their children continue to study even in these difficult times.

In terms of challenges with regard to accessing health services it was found that while 45% respondents stated that they did not face any particular challenge since the pandemic in accessing any healthcare service, 42% of the respondents had stated that they found it difficult to access healthcare services in relation to diseases other than Covid-19 (Table 2).

Table 2: Challenges in Accessing Medical Services

Medical Challenges	Percentage of Respondents
Difficulty in accessing health care services in relation to Covid-19	11%
Difficulty in accessing health care services in relation to other diseases	42%
Difficulty in accessing healthcare services in relation to reproductive health care	2%
No problems	45%
Other	2%
Total	100%

Source: ISST Covid-19 Survey (Phase-II), October-November, 2020.

Qualitative interviews with KII disclosed that most workers were hesitant to go to government hospitals and dispensaries because they feared that they may contract Covid-19. Instead, they got treated by private doctors/quacks in their localities for a fee or did self-medication. Even for deliveries, women preferred private nursing homes.

The survey also highlighted that the majority of women workers were suffering from fatigue and high stress levels. Table 3 shows that at least 62% respondents stated that they were suffering from a sense of fatigue and tiredness at all times, while 28% stated that they were extremely worried about the financial crisis that their household was going through. Only 5% workers stated that they were facing regular fights or domestic violence at home. However, KII interviews revealed that lack of work opportunities and severe reduction in income had led to increased tension in most households. So, cases of domestic violence and even child abuse have increased. But, 'most domestic workers do not admit that these things are happening. There is lot of tension, pressure that women are facing.' (KII interview, November 2020).

Table 3: Impact on Mental Health of Domestic Workers

Impact on mental health	Percentage of Respondents
Sense of fatigue and tiredness	62%
Immense stress due to loss in income	28%
Increase in fights/ domestic violence at home	5%
No impact	5%
Other	2%
Total	100.0%

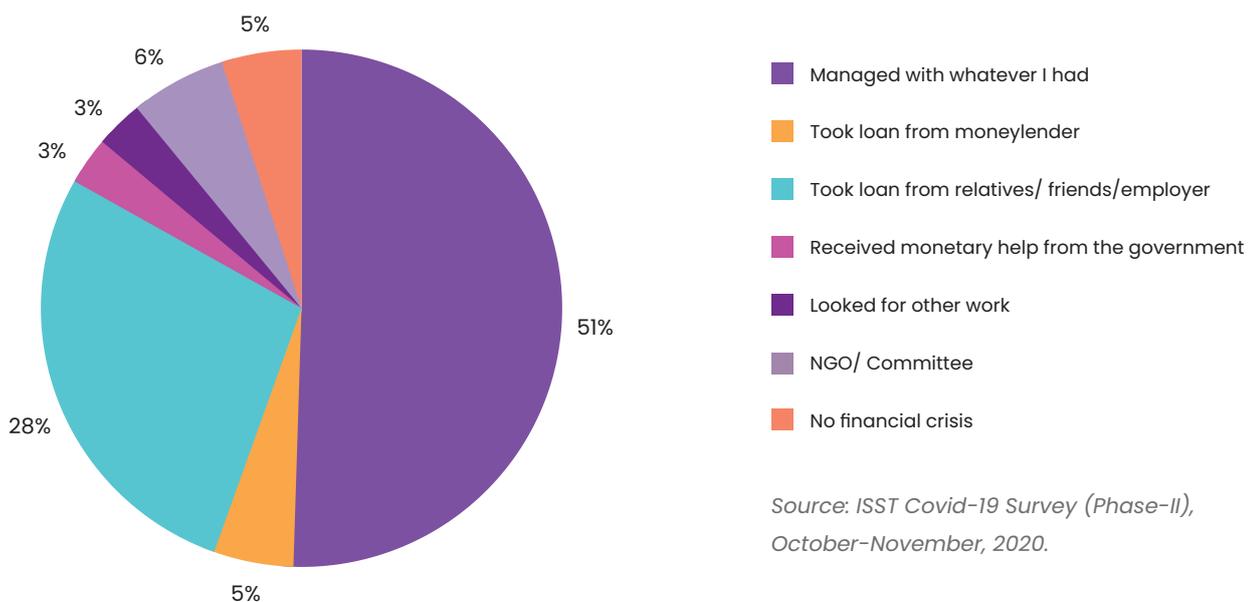
Source: ISST Covid-19 Survey (Phase-II), October-November, 2020.

All workers interviewed for the study stated that their husbands had lost work during the lockdown and are still struggling to find an alternate source of work. While they admitted that they were very stressed about this situation, they did not mention any domestic violence resulting from it. In fact, all of them stated that their husbands were trying very hard to look for an alternate source of work but were unable to get any work.

Coping with Financial Crisis

In terms of coping with the financial crisis, the survey revealed that more than half the respondents tried to manage through this period of financial crisis with whatever they had in terms of savings and household assets. Though some had to resort to taking loans, most preferred doing so from their known people i.e., relatives, friends/ neighbours and employers. Only 5% stated that they took a loan from a moneylender.

Figure 13: Strategies adopted for coping with Financial Crisis



Source: ISST Covid-19 Survey (Phase-II), October-November, 2020.

In terms of government support or benefits, only 3% stated that they had received some help. This was mainly in terms of Rs. 500 in Jan Dhan accounts. Apart from this, the workers did not receive any other monetary help from the government. From qualitative interviews, it was gathered that not all workers who had a Jan Dhan account had

benefited from monetary help. Workers stated that they had come to know of some who had received benefits, but also knew many who did not.

Many workers also migrated back to their villages because payment of rent and other expenses was getting difficult for them. Summing up the situation of the domestic workers, Elizabeth stated, 'The workers know that Covid-19 is here to stay, so many of them have gone back, thinking that they might get some work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) or in agriculture of sowing and harvesting. Those who are here, if the government can give rations for another 3-4 months, they would be able to pick up their lives again. Domestic workers are those people who work and earn their living. In these times of crisis when they are not able to do that, if the government would have given them some kind of assistance, they would not have been in such abject poverty.' (KII interview, November 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

While other countries, including developing nations such as Brazil and South Africa, acknowledging the disproportional impact of the pandemic, are looking at ways of expanding state-funding coverage to include workers in the unorganised sector, India has left most of its working-class population, including domestic workers, on their own without any social or economic net to fall back on.^{iv} Even though the pandemic-induced lockdown was lifted almost seven months ago, the financial vulnerability of these workers continues. This crisis has exposed them to higher risk of exploitation and abuse, both by employers as well as within their households. It is imperative that their valuable contribution is recognised and they are given social and labour protection.

The following are some recommendations that may go a long way in easing the crisis that domestic workers are currently facing:

The government must take immediate steps to fast-track the registration of domestic workers in the Unorganized Workers Social Security Board as per Supreme Court notification issued in 2017.

The government must bring in minimum wage notification in order to ensure that employers are not able to exploit the workers by paying them lower wages than they deserve.

The government should extend provisioning of free ration kits for at least six more months or until the demand for part-time domestic workers becomes similar to pre-Covid-19 days.

A taskforce must be set up by the state labour ministry to make recommendations for long-term relief and protection of domestic workers' rights.

More research should be initiated to document the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on domestic work across countries for wider regulation, social security measures and decent work conditions for domestic workers.

ⁱ https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_748093/lang--en/index.htm

ⁱⁱ Ghosh, A. and Bilkhu A. K. 'Impact of Covid-19 national Lockdown on Women Domestic Workers in Delhi', Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), New Delhi, May 2020. Retrieved from - http://www.isstindia.org/publications/1590124768_pub_ISST_-_Domestic_Workers_Final_compressed.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Neetha , N. 'Paid Domestic Work: Making Sense of the Jigsaw Puzzle', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XLVIII No. 43, October 26, 2013

^{iv} Mohan, D., Kennedy, K., Singh, M., and Agarwal. S. 'Between household abuse and employer apathy: domestic workers bear the brunt of lockdown', The Wire, 24th July 2020. Retrieved from - <https://thewire.in/labour/lockdown-female-domestic-workers-covid-19-lockdown>

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