

Institute of Social Studies Trust



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

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Abstract/Key Findings

By using a mixed-method approach, the study aims to understand the socio-economic impact of the lockdown and the subsequent unlock period on the lives of women informal workers in Delhi. The results indicated that though restrictions have been eased in the post-lockdown phase, many women informal workers have lost their livelihoods and their income had drastically reduced. The burden of domestic chores within their own households, such as cooking, cleaning and childcare, has also increased, and they mostly receive no assistance in this work, other than a few who are helped primarily by their daughters and daughters-in-law. Most of the women workers reported an increase in mental stress due to the uncertainty regarding work and income and its impact on access to essential resources and services such as food, education and healthcare. The study found that other significant challenges are procuring essential food items in times of shortage, increased prices and rent payments. Many have had to resort to borrowing from moneylenders at high interest rates, which has led them into debt traps. Emerging recommendations are presented in the last concluding and recommendation section.

Acknowledgements

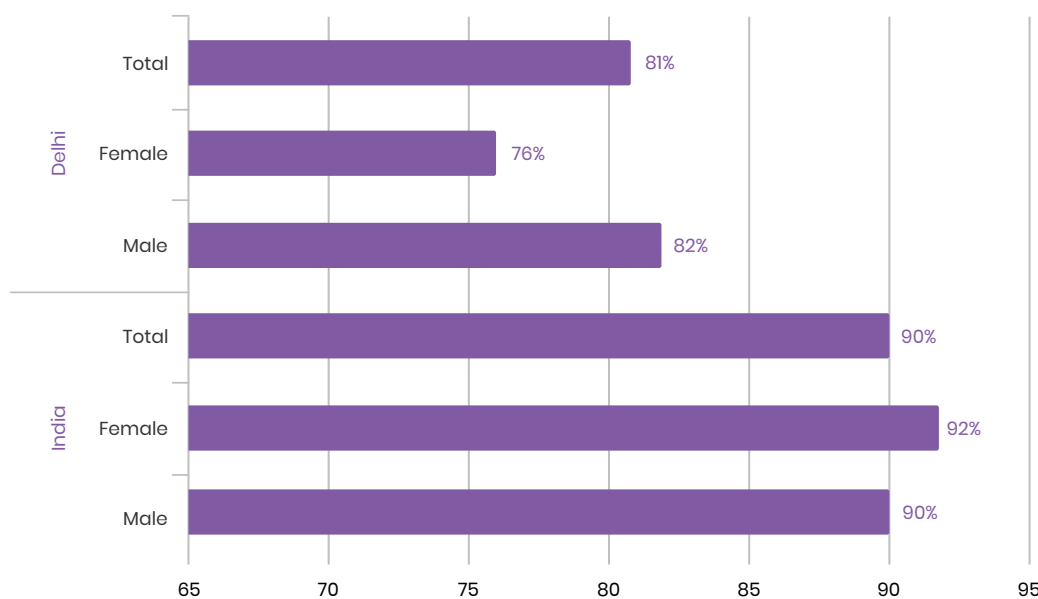
I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all the partner organisations (Chetnalaya, Janpahal, Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangham, Self-Employed Women Association Delhi, Mahila Housing Trust, Basti Suraksha Manch and Bal Vikas Dhara) for extending their support in carrying out this study. I would also like to thank Saathi Centre (a community outreach programme of ISST) for helping us with the study and connecting us with women domestic workers and home-based workers. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Gayatri, Ashmeet, Kavita and Vandana from ISST who conducted the telephone interviews along with members from the partner organisations and without whom the research would not have been possible, nor the safety and security of researchers and participants ensured. Additionally, I wish to thank Gayatri and Ashmeet for their excellent transcription of interviews. Most importantly, I am indebted to all the women informal workers for their time and participation in the study. I sincerely hope this report accurately reflects and does justice to what was shared and brings recognition and visibility to their work and their need for social and economic protection.

Introduction

The sudden decision of the Government of India to impose a nationwide lockdown on 25th March 2020, with four hours' notice and a near-complete shutdown of all economic activities has resulted in a devastating impact on the labour market. Since the government has provided very little in terms of compensation for lost income, and social protection, millions of people have lost their livelihood and faced destitution and starvation, and the unemployment rate has increased manifold. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's (CMIE) Consumer Pyramids Household Survey (CPHS), unemployment rates in April and May of 2020 were over 23 per cent in India, which was three times higher than the rate last year.¹ The impact was particularly severe for informal sector workers who are not eligible for paid leave, and have no social security benefits or formal job contracts. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) report, an estimated 400 million informal sector workers in India have been affected adversely by lockdown measures and/or working in the hardest-hit sectors within the informal economy.

In India, women are almost always involved in some kind of productive and/or reproductive activity but much of their work is not visible. They are largely employed in low skilled, low paid informal work with little to no social security, for instance as domestic workers or self-employed home-based workers (Chen, 2016ⁱⁱ; Raveendran, 2017ⁱⁱⁱ). Figure 1 shows that employment in India is overwhelmingly informal and a higher percentage of women workers than men were in informal employment during 2017-18. However, in Delhi, in 2017-18, a relatively smaller proportion of all workers worked in an informal setup and the percentage of men working in the informal sector was higher as compared to women.

Figure 1: Informal employment as per cent of total employment in India and Delhi during 2017-18



Source: Computed from PLFS (2017-18) unit-level data on Employment and Unemployment

Note: Activity Status UPSS is considered, which includes the principal activity (on which the person spent a relatively long time) and the subsidiary activity (on which the person spent a relatively short time but at least 30 days) during the 365 days preceding the date of the survey

Within the informal economy, there are five categories of work that are more vulnerable than others, due to less recognition. However, they are essential for the effective functioning of society, and a large proportion of workers are involved in these low paying informal jobs. These are home-based workers, domestic workers, street vendors, waste pickers and construction labourers. Among these, women are largely concentrated in domestic work and home-based work. In the informal construction sector and in waste picking work, however, men appear to be the key players while women usually work as support workers in India as well as in Delhi. Table 1 shows that at the national level, home-based work is the most important source of employment for women while in Delhi a higher percentage of women are employed in domestic work than in home-based work. Table 1 also shows that in spite of their larger employment in

home-based work in India, women home-based workers received on an average Rs. 115 per day which was the lowest compared to other four sectors considered in the study and also compared to the other informal sector workers. Similarly, women domestic workers also received lower wages relative to women workers in other informal work (except home-based work) and women workers in all these five sectors received wages well below the national minimum wage in India in 2017-18. In Delhi, women waste workers received wages even lower than that of domestic workers and women waste pickers only received one fourth of men's wages in 2017-18. On the other hand, women domestic workers in Delhi earned on an average Rs. 158 per day during 2017-18. It can, thus, be concluded that women workers are primarily concentrated in low paying jobs and they have little or no savings; as a result, they were especially impacted by the resulting economic and social fallout owing to lockdown and restrictions imposed by the COVID-19. Moreover, the COVID-19 and its' economic toll on women informal workers is likely to get much worse in the coming months (UN Women, 2020^{iv}).

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Workers and Average Daily Wage Rate in Vulnerable Sectors

Types of Occupation	Distribution of Informal Employment						Average Daily Wage Rate (in Rs.)					
	India			Delhi			India			Delhi		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Domestic Worker	1.1	9.6	2.7	2.8	33.1	5.9	261.0	137.4	179.1	370.4	158.4	249.5
Street Vendor	1.3	0.7	1.2	0.6	1.6	0.7	267.4	172.3	259.8	364.0	200.0	303.8
Waste Worker	0.8	0.5	0.7	1.0	0.5	0.7	288.0	170.7	269.7	520.0	130.5	300.0
Home Based Worker	11.8	38.1	16.7	6.5	11.1	7.0	347.6	115.4	262.3	557.6	327.8	504.5
Construction Labourer	15.8	4.6	13.7	7.0	0.9	5.8	242.4	164.8	238.5	447.3	212.0	447.3
Other Informal Sector Workers	69.2	46.6	65.0	82.0	52.8	79.8	358.5	180.2	338.5	560.5	591.4	562.4

Source: Computed from PLFS (2017-18) unit-level data on Employment and Unemployment

Note: Activity Status UPSS is considered, which includes the principal activity (on which the person spent a relatively long time) and the subsidiary activity (on which the person spent a relatively short time but at least 30 days) during the 365 days preceding the date of the survey

In April-May 2020, the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) carried out a series of Rapid Micro Assessment Studies to understand the immediate gendered impact of COVID-19 and the related lockdown on women workers in Delhi engaged in five informal sectors – domestic work, home-based work, construction work, street vending and waste picking. The study highlighted that around 83 per cent of women workers faced a drastic decrease in their income. Among them, 68 per cent reported that they could not work due to their inability to go out and police patrolling, while 55 per cent identified their fear of contracting COVID as a reason for their loss of livelihood.^v Additionally, they had to bear the increased burden of unpaid work and had to provide essential resources such as food, water and fuel for their families. The study also highlighted that these families found it difficult to access health centres and medicines, and faced issues with regard to recharging their phones. Many of them reported that their reduced income and an increase in expenses had led to a debt trap.

Now that many months have passed since both the survey was conducted and the lockdown lifted, it is important to examine the present economic situation of women informal workers and the significant changes in their immediate social and economic circumstances, as well as how they cope with it. Against this backdrop, this study attempts to assess:

- ◉ the impact of the COVID-19 related lockdown and the subsequent effect on their jobs and income
- ◉ the way they manage unpaid household work and whether the lockdown as well as its easing have led to any change in attitudes towards unpaid work
- ◉ the problems they face in accessing essential resources such as water, food rations, health, transport, etc.
- ◉ coping mechanisms adopted during the unlocking phase
- ◉ women workers' perspective about the safety measures during the unlocking phases in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Survey Methodology

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, Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangham, Self-Employed Women Association (SEWA) Delhi, Mahila Housing Trust (MHT), Basti Suraksha Manch and Bal Vikas Dhara,) working in each of the five sectors mentioned, in Delhi, during October–November 2020. The quantitative survey was conducted at the beginning of the study and the qualitative survey tool was designed to address the gaps identified during the quantitative survey. The quantitative data for this study was collected through a telephonic survey with 316 women respondents using Google forms and all data collection 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 36 qualitative interviews (22 were with women informal workers and 14 were with the stakeholders) based on access. Strict anonymity of the survey respondents was maintained, the purpose of the study made clear to them beforehand, and prior consent taken before the survey/interviews began. Participation in this study was voluntary and respondents were under no obligation to complete the survey/interview if they were hesitant or reluctant at any point. Care was taken to schedule calls at times convenient for the women workers, and precautions were taken during data collection to avoid undue distress to the respondents or their families. No questions that may hurt sentiments or may be discriminatory against any person based on caste, class, religion, race, gender or sexual orientation, were asked.

Demographic Profile



Table 2 describes the basic demographic profile of the respondents. They belong to the age group of 16 to 70 years, while the average age of the women street vendors and domestic workers is higher as compared to others, while relatively younger women are involved in waste picking. In the sample, widowed women are largely found in domestic work and street vending activities. Moreover, it is worth noting that the nature and extent of marginalization is not identical for all women and the concentration of women from some particular caste or religious groups in specific sectors is evident in the study. Muslim women are mostly employed in waste picking and home-based work while Hindu women are largely involved in the construction sector and street vending activities. In the domestic work sector, 74 per cent of the respondents are Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe women. It validates a consolidation of caste or religion-based disadvantages, even within the larger context of women's marginalization.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

DOMESTIC WORKERS (n=65)				
AVERAGE AGE	AVERAGE SIZE	MARITAL STATUS	RELIGION	CASTE
41	5	69% Married 23% Widowed	58% Hindu 42% Christian	11% General 34% SC 40% ST 6% OBC
STREET VENDORS (n=65)				
AVERAGE AGE	AVERAGE SIZE	MARITAL STATUS	RELIGION	CASTE
43	5	78% Married 2% Widowed	92% Hindu 5% Muslim	34% General 14% SC 12% OBC
WASTE PICKER (n=62)				
AVERAGE AGE	AVERAGE SIZE	MARITAL STATUS	RELIGION	CASTE
34	6	89% Married 6% Widowed	48% Hindu 52% Muslim	42% General 53% SC
HOME-BASED WORKER (n=61)				
AVERAGE AGE	AVERAGE SIZE	MARITAL STATUS	RELIGION	CASTE
35	5	85% Married 8% Widowed	69% Hindu 30% Muslim	36% SC 31% General 20% Didn't Respond 20% OBC
CONSTRUCTION LABOURERS (n=63)				
AVERAGE AGE	AVERAGE SIZE	MARITAL STATUS	RELIGION	CASTE
40	5	87% Married 11% Widowed	97% Hindu 2% Muslim	40% SC 35% OBC 11% General 10% Didn't Respond
TOTAL (n=316)				
AVERAGE AGE	AVERAGE SIZE	MARITAL STATUS	RELIGION	CASTE
39	5	82% Married 14% Widowed	72% Hindu 18% Muslim 9% Christian	35% SC 26% General 15% Didn't Respond 14% OBC 11% ST

Note: Total Sample Size 316

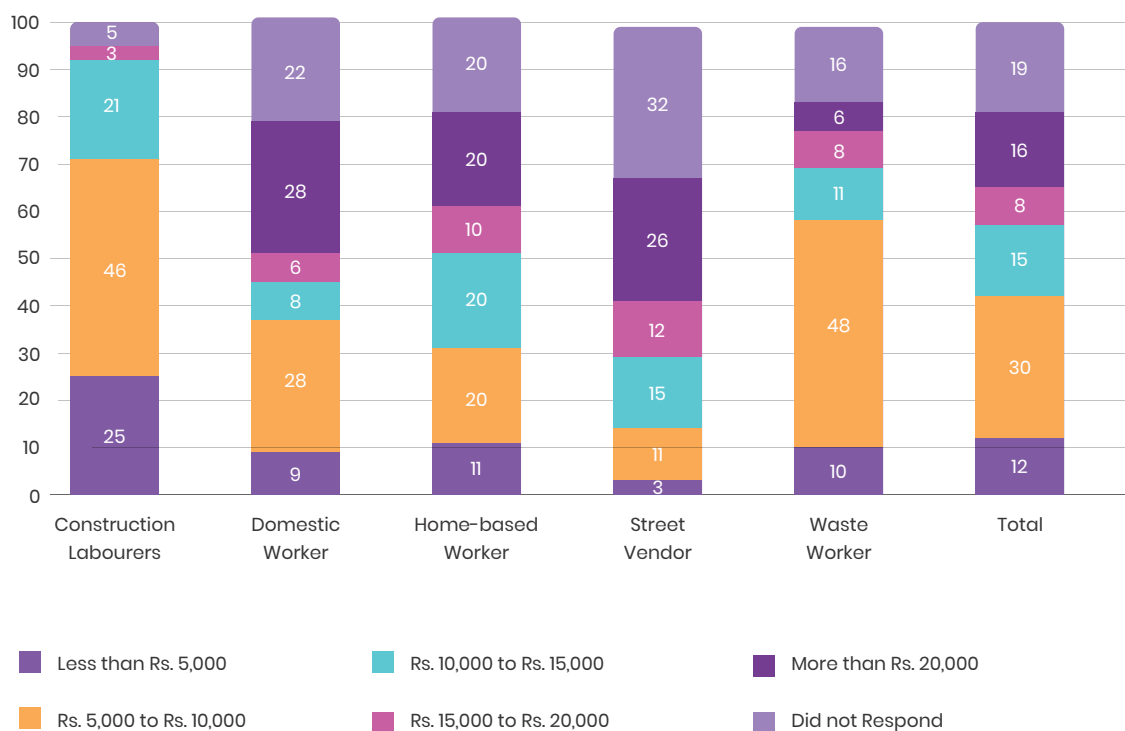
Source: ISST COVID-19 Survey (Phase-II), October-November, 2020

Figure 2 presents the average monthly household expenditure (on food, healthcare, education, utilities and durable goods, transport, and others) of the respondents. 45 per cent spent between Rs. 5000 to Rs. 15000 per month in the last 6 months during the pandemic. However, among the 316 respondents, with the average household size of 5, 12 per cent could not even afford to spend Rs. 5000 per month and among them 43 per cent work as construction labourers. During qualitative interviews, many of these women informal workers shared the financial crisis that they faced during the lockdown, and also the challenges that they were struggling with in the current times. Kavita, a construction labourer mentioned that her daughter borrowed some money from a moneylender in the village and sent her. Then only they could manage some food and water. They stayed hungry for 10 days as they were not in a position to buy rice and pulses and they did not have access to either cooked food or ration from PDS shops during the lockdown. Rajni, a street vendor also resonated the same and said that

“I could not afford milk for my son and so I used to give him warm water instead of milk whenever he cried for food. We ate chapatti and salt or rice and salt and that’s how we survived the entire lockdown” (Interview, November 2020)

The other important point to note is that across these five sectors, construction labourers and waste pickers could not afford food for all the members in the household, and they suffered more as compared to domestic workers, home-based worker and street vendors.

Figure 2: Distribution of Workers across Monthly Consumption Expenditure Class



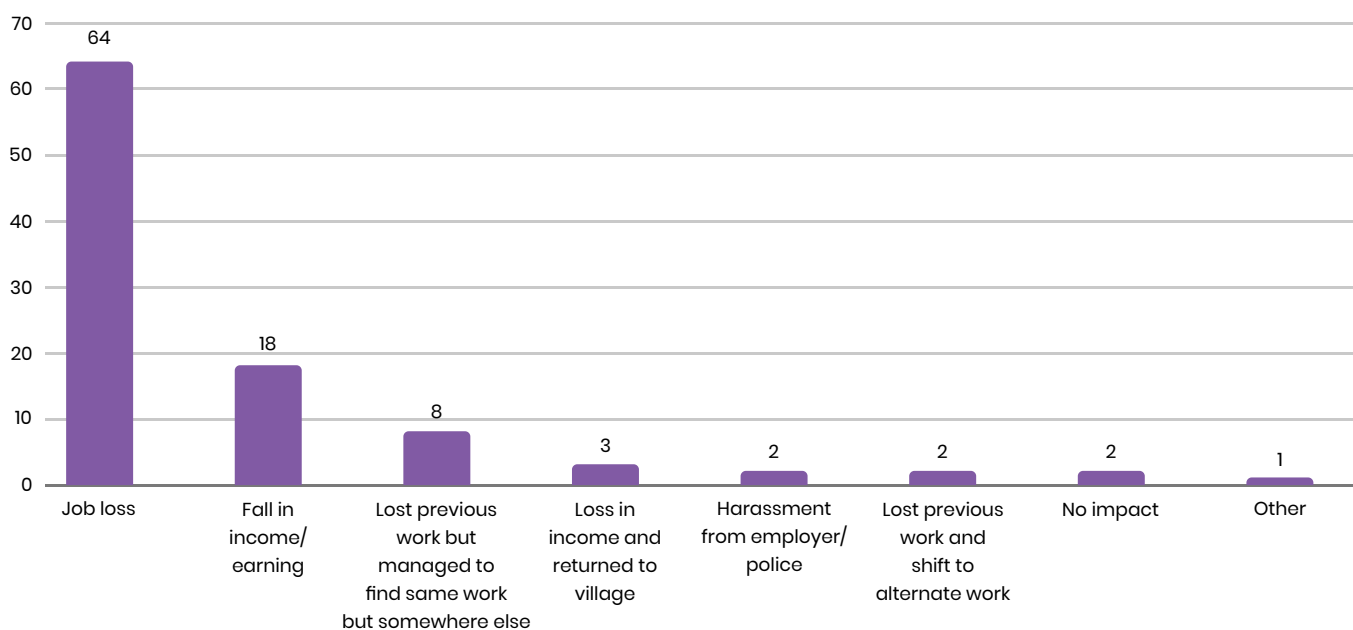
Note: Total Sample Size 316

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

Impact on Paid Work/Employment

Different studies have shown that women have suffered the highest decline in employment through the lockdown and recovery phases (Deshpande, 2020a^{vi} and 2020b^{vii}, Azim Premji University, 2020^{viii}). Figure 3 shows that of those surveyed, 64 per cent stated that they have lost the means to earn a living, while 18 per cent reported a significant fall in their income/earning. Only 8 per cent of the respondents have been able to find employment opportunities even after the lockdown, and during the survey, many women shared how the pandemic has wreaked havoc on their work and income.

Figure 3: Impact on overall paid employment during the Unlock period



Note: Total Sample Size 316

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

However, sector-specific results of the impact of the lockdown indicate some interesting patterns which have been presented in the following sub-sections.

Domestic Workers

Within the domestic work sector, those who worked as ‘part-timers’ were the worst affected by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. They were perceived to be ‘corona carriers’ by their employers due to the fact that they visited number of households and also lived in congested spaces, and hence were barred from entering their work spaces (employer’s household) by majority of the employers. 8 out of 10 domestic workers suffered from the loss of employment and highlighted a significant decline in the number of households that they could now work in as compared to pre-COVID days. During qualitative interviews, respondents shared that even now that the lockdown has been lifted, they have not been able to get back to work immediately and 7 out of 10 of them stated that finding work has been the main challenge for them ever since the end of the lockdown. One of the stakeholders mentioned the change in preferences of private households that employ domestic workers and revealed that “employers now prefer only live-in workers because part-time workers work in three-four homes and come into contact with many people and because of their nature of work, following social distancing is not possible” (Key Informant Interview, November 2020). One of the stakeholders informed that in Gurgaon some employers were asking their full-time workers to go for a COVID-19 test and if the test result was negative and she agreed to stay with them, they were keeping her as a live-in worker (Key Informant Interview, November 2020). So, for domestic workers fear of pandemic was the main reason for

the significant decline in employment. The survey results also showed non-payment of wages during the lockdown period as another important factor why some workers did not want to go back to their previous employers and instead preferred new employers. A key informant shared that employers too were hesitant to call back the workers as they had not paid them for the lockdown period. The fear of the pandemic has also changed working conditions of most domestic workers. Those who were able to return to work said that their employers asked them to follow new norms. 15 percent of the workers who had been able to return back to work stated that they were now asked to get tested for COVID-19 while 64 per cent specified that they need to wash hands and wear masks all the time while they work in their employer's household. Some of them also had to change clothes along with washing of hands and feet and wearing mask. During qualitative interviews, it was observed that as most men domestic workers work outside the household premises as gardeners, sweepers, security guards in residential complexes, they were able to continue with their work. But, since women workers mostly work inside the household premises, they were more adversely impacted.^{ix}



Street Vendors



The survey results indicate that though restrictions have been eased in the post-lockdown phase, 52 per cent of women street vendors reported that they have lost their means to a livelihood, while 34 per cent stated that their income has drastically reduced.^x During interviews, many street vendors said that they often have to bribe the police during an eviction drive ordered by officials. 42 per cent of women street vendors mentioned that the closure of markets and vending areas has posed a challenge for them and some said that the fear of the spread of COVID-19 has kept many customers away, thereby causing a decline in their income over the last six months. Further, since physical shopping is perceived as being risky due to the bodily proximity it necessitates, consumer buying patterns have rapidly

shifted to online shopping. This change in consumption patterns and the greater reliance on e-shopping is a threat to the livelihoods of street vendors (*Key Informant Interview, November 2020*). Despite the loss of jobs, 86 per cent women have not managed to shift to selling other products/services or find alternative employment. Unlike men, women street vendors have been unable to move their selling carts and look for new vending locations. The lack of adequate capital has only exacerbated their situation. During the qualitative interviews, one of the respondents revealed that she tried to search for other work but could not find any.

“After the lockdown was lifted, I tried to look for alternate work like domestic work and home-based work but could not get any. Domestic workers and home-based workers are also looking for work, so how will I get? I have no money left to restart my snacks stall and if the situation prevails, we will surely die of hunger if not COVID-19.” (Telephone interview with Seema, Pragati Maidan, November 2020).

Faced with the lack of alternative employment, many have continued with the same street vending activities as before but these now yield little returns.

Construction Labourers

The survey showed that 87 per cent of women construction labourers have completely lost their work and income due to the national lockdown and suffered a steep decline in income over the last six months during the pandemic. Only 19 per cent reported that they have been able to start working again as construction labourers. However, all of them said that they are nervous about the rising pollution levels in Delhi and are apprehensive about losing employment again. During the interviews, stakeholders mentioned that the Real Estate Regulation (and Development) Act, 2016 (RERA) and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime, along with increasing mechanization, had affected many low skilled workers, mostly women. The pandemic and increasing levels of pollution have only served to aggravate the employment crisis. It is simply because when pollution levels are high restrictions on construction activities are imposed in Delhi and NCR region (A Key Informant Interview, November 2020). The limited work available in the sector can only be done by skilled workers i.e. men or machines (Key Informant Interview, November 2020).^{xi} It was also pointed out that contractors avoid hiring women so that they do not need to provide infrastructural facilities like toilets, restrooms and crèches at the workplace. It was also highlighted that many labour camps have been moved to the outskirts of the city not only due to lack of space for settlements but also to avoid frequent inspections by labour inspectors and this has significantly reduced job opportunities for women construction labourers for whom mobility is far more difficult than for men. (Key Informant Interview, November 2020). The qualitative interviews revealed that the women construction workers living at the labour camps were slightly better off compared to the women workers outside the labour camps as they at least have a place to reside in case of no work and also get advance payments from contractors to procure food and water for themselves and their families. By contrast, women casual labourers outside the labour camps were the first ones to migrate owing to challenges in paying rent and providing food for themselves and their families. The Delhi Government had announced Rs. 5000 cash transfer twice during the lockdown to all registered construction workers in their bank account but the survey results indicate that only 8 per cent of women workers received the same despite many of them having been registered for it in May 2020.



Home-Based Workers



Among the women home-based workers surveyed, 56 per cent reported a complete loss of work and income while 33 per cent witnessed a decline in work and wages as an immediate impact of the pandemic.^{xii} The study also observed that home-based workers who are part of cooperatives and producer companies have received at least some work during and after the lockdown but individual home-based workers who are not part of any co-operatives have been unable to either get onto online platforms to sell their products or shift to mask stitching or food supply chains that were in demand. Moreover, these women workers who were not member of any cooperatives were the worst affected as they lost all sources of income as an impact of the lockdown and struggled to find work even after the lockdown was lifted. One of the stakeholders stated that some of the cooperatives and producer companies had done some quick skilling programs and could shift quickly to mask stitching which was on demand. They could also get onto online and sell their products on Gocoup or Amazon which the individual home-based workers could not do (Key Informant Interview, November 2020). But during the post-lockdown phase, the condition of these organised workers has deteriorated and they had observed a

reduction in work received from SEWA as compared to the pre-lockdown period. The demand for both masks and PPEs has declined significantly during the post lockdown. Moreover, after the lockdown as the factories started making masks at a large scale and the cooperatives have been unable to compete against these factories (*Key Informant Interview, November 2020*).

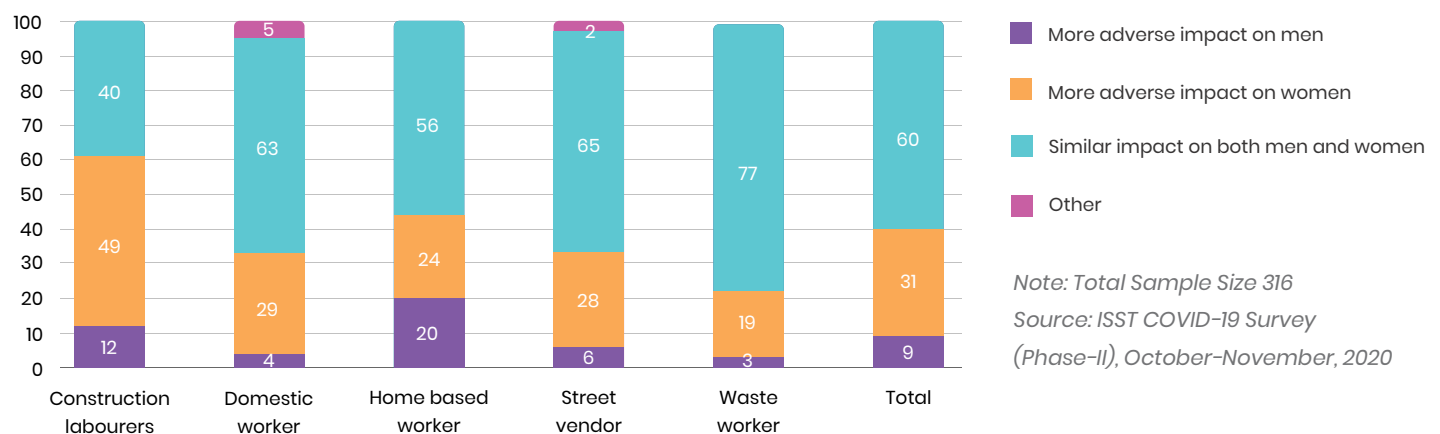
Waste Pickers

Even before the pandemic, waste workers faced many challenges related to their work and there has always been a lack of visibility and recognition for their contribution toward keeping the cities clean and reducing pollution levels. In many parts of Delhi, private companies have been given the responsibility of collecting waste and this has further pushed the waste pickers into economic vulnerability. Although waste workers, working under contractors, are the ones who collect the waste, they are not entitled to any user fee and it is contractors who collect money from households. The waste workers are employed by multiple contractors and there is neither any fixed rate of payment nor do they have any right to the waste (*Key Informant Interview October 2020*). With the entry of the private sector, women waste workers struggle to find space in Community bins (*dhalaos*) to segregate the waste, since these places are now controlled by private players, who have been assigned by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi to transport waste from the *dhalaos* to the landfills. Moreover, with the fear of COVID-19 the nature and conditions of work has gone worse for these waste workers. Earlier, people would keep their waste outside their homes for collection, but because of the pandemic most housing societies do not even let waste workers enter the society gates. In most residential societies, there is a designated space for waste collection and the waste pickers were supposed to segregate the waste in that space. However, due to the pandemic, most gated societies are not allowing them to do so and if they try and do it outside the societies, local people raise objections. Therefore, most waste workers are not able to segregate the waste properly. As a result, women’s access to waste has become limited and most often they segregate waste at a godown as a worker or at home. Women waste workers face other workspace challenges like access to toilets in segregation places and sexual and economic harassment from officials.^{xiii} Almost all workers have been severely impacted by the pandemic-related lockdown and many of them have lost their work as the godowns are closed. One-third of them also find it difficult to collect waste, and among those who are able to collect, some have to discard the waste and others are forced to sell it at low prices.



Women Waste Workers are segregating waste in Delhi
Photo by Shiney Chakraborty

Figure 4: Perceived Impact of the Lockdown and Post-lockdown on Men and Women Informal workers (in %)



On being asked, whether the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is different on men and women, 60 per cent of women informal workers mentioned that there is no difference and that the impact is the same on both genders while 31 per cent responded that the impact of the pandemic on jobs was greater for women because of the already low number of opportunities available to them. Restrictions on mobility and the increased burden of domestic chores have kept women workers from finding enough time to look for employment (see Figure 4). Significantly, more construction labourers believe that the impact has been more on women while a larger proportion of women waste workers, street vendors and domestic workers reported that they view the effect of the pandemic as being the same for men and women. By contrast compared to other sectors, many women home-based workers believed that the impact was more on men as because women had more work opportunities in the initial phases of the unlock period as compared to men. This could be because many of these women were part of cooperatives such as Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) that could provide the work of mask production to them for at least a few months after the lockdown was called off.

Impact on Unpaid Work

While women were already doing most of the world's unpaid work before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging research suggests that the crisis and subsequent lockout have further increased the burden of unpaid work on women. The recently released Time Use Survey (2019)^{xiv} shows that even before the onset of the pandemic, 85.4 per cent of women in Delhi were involved in unpaid caregiving and domestic activities while only one-third of the men were engaged in unpaid work. The wide gender gap in the unpaid workforce participation rate is also reflected in the greater time spent by women in such unpaid household work as compared to men. On average, in Delhi, women spent six and a half hours every day on unpaid work whereas men spent a little over two hours a day.



The COVID-19 crisis has made starkly visible the fact that along with the gross imbalance in the distribution of unpaid care work, there has been a significant increase in unpaid work within the household (Folbre, 2020)^{xv}. The April-May 2020 ISST study also indicated that out of 176 women respondents, 66 per cent reported an increase in inside household domestic chores and 36 per cent stated an increase in child and elderly care work during the lockdown period. The present study shows that, of those surveyed, more than half (59 per cent) reported an increase in inside household domestic work like cooking and cleaning, while 9 per cent stated that the burden of outside household domestic work like fetching water, and collecting firewood and fuel has also increased over the last 6 months (see Table 3). During interviews with women workers, one of the respondents stated that

“My household work has increased significantly. All the household members who used to work earlier are now staying at home as they have no work. So, they ask for hot chapattis and food always. Earlier, when they used to work, I used to cook in the morning only and packed the food for them. But now I have to cook several times a day and I do not get time to rest” (Telephone interview with Hasina, Home Based Worker, Savda Colony, November 2020)

Table 3: Increase in Domestic Chores during the Post-Lockdown period (in Percentages)

Types of domestic work	Percentage of Women Respondents
Inside Household Domestic Work	58.5
No increase in unpaid work	21.5
Outside household Domestic Work	9.2
Arranging resources	4.4
Helping household enterprises as unpaid family helper	3.2
Other	3.2
Types of care work	
Child care	65.5
No Increase	19.6
Caring for both (children and elderly)	7
Caring for patients/ sick relative	3.2
Care of elderly people	2.5
Caring for a child with special needs/ person with special needs	1.6
Caring for pets	0.6

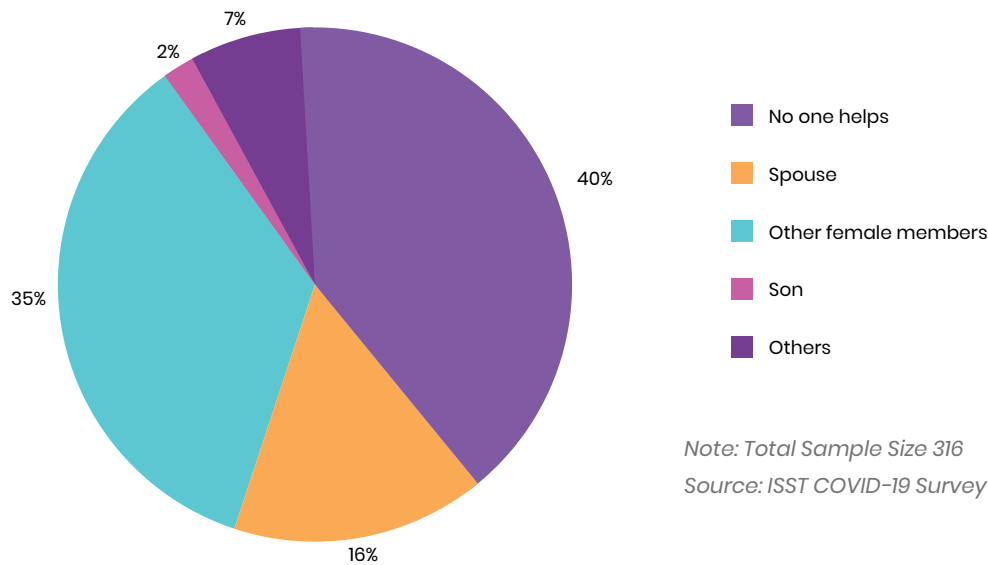
Note: Total Sample Size 316

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

However, it must be noted that 22 per cent of women stated that there has been no increase in unpaid household chores. 45 per cent of the women who made this statement live in small-sized households and so, they are expected to perform comparatively less unpaid work. Further, 60 per cent of those who believe that the pandemic has not increased their unpaid work, belong to the younger age group (up to 35 years of age) and thus, they have relatively less familial responsibilities. Similarly, among those doing unpaid care work within their households, 66 per cent mentioned that since schools and Anganwadi centres are still closed, they have to spend more time with children. During the qualitative interviews, many respondents shared that because of the increase in unpaid work, they find it difficult to get back to work. Rajiya, a woman waste worker, who is a single parent of three small children (the youngest being 1 year old) said that every night after 9 pm, she goes to collect waste from streets of Shahbad Dairy to Shahdhara (24 km stretch) and segregates and sells it the next day to a dealer. She has to carry her sleeping children in the push-cart along with her as no one is there at home to take care of them. She also said that she carries water and a milk bottle to feed the child in between work.

Out of the 316 women informal workers surveyed, 20 per cent of women do not consider care work as additional work and refuse to acknowledge any increase in the same during the post-lockdown period. During the qualitative interviews, many of them shared that they believe that women are primarily responsible for household work and so whatever the circumstances, it is their responsibility to cook food for their families and to look after children (as shared by Construction Labourers Saroj, Pitampura, Delhi, November 2020). These women informal workers were also asked whether any family members assist them in managing household chores and unpaid care work in the last 6 months and 4 out of 10 women stated that nobody helped them (see Figure 5). 35 per cent replied that it is mostly the female members of the household, either daughters or daughters-in-law, who help them in performing household chores while 16 per cent of the respondents' receive help from their spouses in managing domestic chores.

Figure 5: Who helps with Household Chores during the Unlock period?



Note: Total Sample Size 316

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

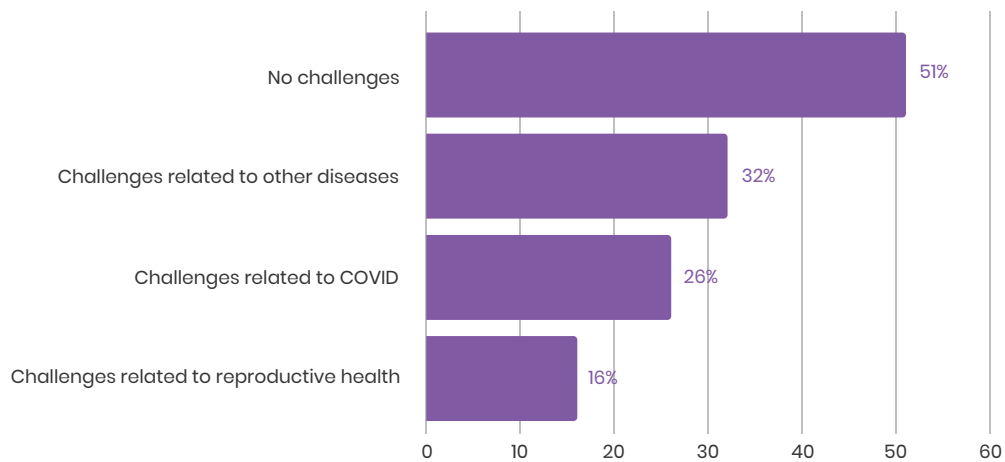
Household size plays a key role in unpaid work distribution and there is a positive relationship between household size and the help that women receive from others in household chores. In households with up to 3 members, 56 per cent of the respondents stated that nobody helps them in managing their unpaid work, whereas, with an increase in household size, the percentage of respondents not receiving help from anyone declined significantly. Alternatively, when there are fewer members in the household, their spouses help them in domestic chores. However, with an increase in household size (above 6), women are less likely to get any help from their spouses and instead, their elder daughters or daughters-in-law help them. It may be concluded that in an extended family, women informal workers are more likely to get help from other women in the household, like their elder daughters and daughters-in-law.

Challenges in Accessing Essential Services during the Pandemic and beyond

Apart from their paid and unpaid work challenges, many of these women informal workers have faced several other difficulties over the last six months during the pandemic. Figure 6 presents a grim picture in terms of healthcare and medical challenges during the post-lockdown period. 32 per cent of women reported facing difficulties in accessing healthcare facilities for different chronic ailments such as Blood Sugar, Thyroid, Cancer etc. One of the respondents shared that her eldest daughter has been suffering from Thyroid for a few years and was under treatment at Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital. However, the fear caused by the riots in February kept them from going to the hospital. Soon after, the lockdown started and when they went there to collect medicines they found that the hospital authorities were treating only COVID-19 patients. They could not get the required medicines and had to purchase them from other sources (*Telephone interview with Gulnaar, Home Based Workers, Rajeev Nagar, Delhi, November 2020*). 26 per cent of the respondents stated that they find it difficult to access COVID related healthcare services. However, 51 per cent mentioned that they do not face any such problem – this must be viewed in the context of the findings of the qualitative interviews that reveal that many workers avoided going for health check-ups because of the fear of the disease, lack of awareness, and superstitions, instead opting to self-medicate.



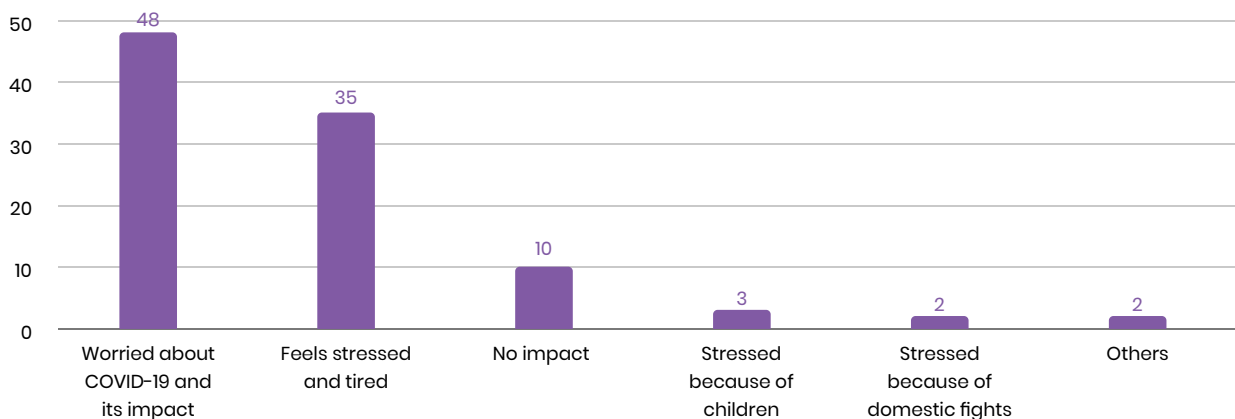
Figure 6: Major Health and Medical Challenges in the past six months (in Percentages)



*Note: Total Sample Size 316, Note: Values are based on multiple responses and so will not add to 100.
Source: ISST COVID-19 Survey (Phase-II), October–November, 2020*

An attempt has also been made to record whether any respondents, or anyone in their households, has been affected by COVID-19 in the last six months. Out of 316 respondents, only five reported having been infected by Coronavirus or having a family member who has been infected by the virus. Social stigma and discriminatory attitudes towards infected people have been reported by many women informal workers as well as stakeholders. They stated that fear of contracting the disease is the root cause of such discrimination. The COVID-19 related lockdown and the subsequent changes that have become a part of everyday living have affected the lives and livelihood of women informal workers in varied ways. Nine out of 10 women informal workers stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased mental stress and tension due to the uncertainty regarding work and income as well its impact on access to essential resources and services such as food, education and healthcare (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Mental Stress and Tension in the past six months (in Percentages)



*Note: Total Sample Size 316
Source: ISST COVID-19 Survey (Phase-II), October–November, 2020.*

It is important to note that lack of work opportunities and severe reduction in income has led to an increase in tension in most households. Interviews with stakeholders revealed that women home-based workers are the worst sufferers of domestic fights (*Key Informant Interview, November 2020*). For home-based workers, home is the location of both productive and reproductive work and they have very limited interaction with the outside world. Street vendors and domestic workers may be slightly better off as some are able to defend themselves against domestic violence

through the skills acquired through everyday interaction with customers or employers (*Key Informant Interview, November 2020*). Nevertheless, almost all the stakeholders confirmed that there has been an increase in domestic violence and abuse over the last six months under the pandemic. Interestingly, on being questioned about this, none of the women workers agreed with this observation. One of the respondents said:

“What will we get by quarrelling and fighting, we will get nothing? It will not change our existing conditions. So, instead of fighting we can discuss with our family members and try to solve it” (Rinku, Domestic Worker, Kalyanpuri, October 2020)

This may be because Indian women are socialised into accepting violence from their husbands as an aspect of their private relationships and hence choose not to discuss it with anyone outside of their close family members.

Table 4 depicts other significant challenges reported by women during the post-lockdown period. 64 per cent of them have faced issues in procuring essential food items during the last six months. 36 per cent of the respondents mentioned the difficulty they face in managing their children’s education as access to smartphones and recharging those with sufficient balance to be able to use the internet is a luxury in the absence of any income. Moreover, many households have more than one school-going child but have only one smartphone. Only one child can use it at a time, and the children have to take turns to attend their classes. Hence, the education of these children is further compromised. 32 per cent of women stated that paying rent is another challenge for them given the drastic fall in income even after the lockdown was lifted. Other major concerns voiced were procuring water and fuel for daily household needs, recharging phones, and accessing transport.

Table 4: Other challenges in the past six months

Types of Challenges	Percentage of Women Respondents
Procuring essential food items due to shortage and high prices	64
Managing children’s education	36
Payment of rent	32
Procuring water and fuel due to shortage and high prices	24
Phone re-charge	17
Accessing transport	14
No problems faced	8

Note: Total Sample Size 316, Values are based on multiple responses and so will not add to 100.

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

Coping Strategies Adopted during the Pandemic and beyond

During interviews, many of the women informal workers stated that apart from cooked food and ration kits, they have not received any monetary help from the government. Even the credit/loan facility announced by both the central and state government aimed at achieving self-reliance is hardly beneficial for women street vendors because they are not in a position to repay the loan unless they can restart their business. Of those surveyed, many women construction labourers reported not having received promised compensation amounts because of lack of awareness, and many women workers discontinued their registration with the concerned board when they got pregnant. Women domestic workers are not entitled to any government relief even under the unorganised sector social security board since they have not been registered with it, and they receive no social security benefit from the government. Similarly, women waste workers and home-based workers were struggling for their right to be acknowledged as workers even before the pandemic, and the fact that they are not registered with any board and do not get any cash relief from the government has simply worsened their economic situation.

The study reveals that women informal workers adopted some coping strategies to deal with the reduction in their income and Table 5 shows that 53 per cent of women have taken loans either from moneylenders at exorbitant interest rates (sometimes 10 per cent per month) or from their relatives or employers. During the qualitative interviews, it was found that repayment is a major concern and the interest burden leads to a vicious cycle of debt traps. 38 per cent have resorted to using existing savings, using money received through sale of assets, or by managing in whatever way they can instead of taking a loan.

Table 5: Coping Mechanisms Adopted during the Unlock period

Coping Strategies Adopted	Percentage of Women Respondents
Nothing, managing in whatever I am getting	24
Taken loan	53
Using existing savings/Selling Assets	14
Received assistance from Government	3
Taken up other work	2
No problems	2
Others	3

Note: Total Sample Size 316

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

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is needless to say that these informal workers are the backbone of the city and provide many essential services. However, their work is not recognised or valued as such, and they do not have a social security net to fall back on in such unprecedented times. They mostly depend on their daily wage earnings for survival and do not have cash or savings. Rebuilding lives and livelihoods has proved to be difficult for women informal workers. Therefore, some necessary steps must be taken by the government to support them and bring recognition to the important contribution they make to urban societies.

The following are some recommendations that may go long way in easing the crisis that these women informal workers are currently facing:

For the Domestic workers, the government should take immediate measures to fast track the registration of them to the Unorganized Workers Social Security Board as per Supreme Court notification issues in 2017.

There is an urgent need to recognize home-based workers as workers and provide them social security benefits, as without the safety nets they are going to fall deeper into poverty and starvation

The compensation amount announced by the state government for construction labourers should be immediately transferred to them irrespective of their registration renewal status.

The credit/loan facility announced by the government for street vendors, should be converted into direct income benefit as livelihood support and with a further reservation for women in this a considerable percentage of women street vendors will be benefitted.

In the short term, the government must take immediate steps to generate more public employment opportunities: For example, by expanding the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme to urban areas, along with further reservation for women in these programs so as to truly benefit women.

The government must ensure the effective implementation of minimum wage notification.

The government should extend the provisioning of free ration kits for at least 6 more months or till the time work and income are restored to pre-COVID levels.

In the long term, gender-sensitive infrastructure facilities at public areas such as access to water, sanitation and hygiene should be provided at free of cost by the government keeping in mind the need for women. Additionally, some safety precautions like street light and women police patrolling should be taken to prevent sexual harassment in public places.

In the long run, the state government must conduct a survey to estimate the number of waste workers and street vendors currently working in Delhi and provide them Identity cards and necessary protection gears to avoid the chance of getting infected.

A Taskforce must be set up by state labour ministry for recommendations for long term relief and protection of informal workers' rights.

More research to be initiated to create evidence of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's informal work in each of these sectors across countries for wider regulation, social security measures and decent work conditions for them.

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About ISST

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