

Migrants: The Visibly Invisible A Narration with Reference to Migrants in the Lockdown Period

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In India a large section of toiling migrants are those that enter the labour force with a low resource and skill base. As a cheap source of labour, they provide a range of manual, entrepreneurial and social services. Estimates indicate that migrants constitute more than 90% of the unorganised, informal sector. Media reports tracking their desperate flight in the aftermath of the lockdown suggest that rather than facing possible eviction and starvation, there was an exodus despite insurmountable hurdles due to non-availability of affordable public transport and sealing of inter-state borders. The narratives painted a poignant picture of the dilemma of migrants in a hostile urban environment. Back home they also faced the prospect of social isolation due to the 'unknown virus from outside' and extreme poverty. Many amongst those that stayed back reported a huge loss of wages due to the prolonged layoff and possible loss of employment. The current paper looks at the impacts of the lockdown, focussing specifically on the vulnerabilities of select sectors -- domestic workers, waste pickers sex workers, specific to Pune and Sangli. The major component of the paper documents anecdotal narratives from activists who work with these sections and sector workers, using the reflexive narrative approach. We have also drawn from select news clippings, feature stories, and reports that were aplenty during the lockdown. The narratives capture their perceptions about the ways in which the agencies of governance and their service users have wavered between sympathy and fear about 'migrants' being carriers in community transmission and the implications of these. From this exploration sensitive insights are shared such that the future creates support for developing a conducive work and social environment for them, by influencing attitudes that appreciate and uphold the dignity and entitlements of migrant workers from a rights and justice perspective.

Key words: *COVID, lockdown, migrants sex workers, waste pickers, domestic workers attitudes, dignity, rights.*



Introduction

COVID entered India in late January 2020. The national lockdown was announced months later as a measure to prevent community transmission. The suddenness of the announcement and the extension of the lockdown as each stage ended, created uncertainties that impacted the migrant workers – a pool of largely unskilled and unorganised labour force, mainly sustained on daily or irregular wages. Then the desperate homeward march began. Saran (2020) evokes this picture of the exodus where the existence of migrants as outsiders held up a harsh mirror to two contrasting images – elite India and toiling Bharat. “It was a lockdown that unlocked millions of Indians. As India receded into homes...Bharat hit the streets defying the order....gripped by a fear bigger than the virus....Collectively they were more anxious than fearful, felt more abandoned than angry, were lacking security not courage...dispossessed by the cities they were working in with a dream to build a better life” (Saran, 2020, p. 10).

International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that only 22% of India’s workforce falls under salaried employment. The 78% that has no assured salary would thus be part of a huge mass of the informal economy.

In the immediate aftermath of lockdown, CMIE (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy) data indicates urban unemployment stood at 7.35% and rural at 6.21%. By 5th April this registered a more than fourfold jump –Urban 30.93 and Rural 20.21. Unemployment rate of 8.74% for March 2020 was the highest in 43 months pointing to one possible reason for the massive exodus of migrant workers (Thakur, 2020p.10). Migrants’ unemployment compounded their psychological and financial distress due to their inability to send money to their dependents at home. Out of 884 deaths during lockdown (March 25th –June 17th) due to non-COVID reasons, 335 (38%) were those of migrant workers. The first three most prominent reasons were, accidents during their journeys back home; starvation and financial distress; and suicides due to fear of infection, loneliness, lack of freedom of movement, inability to go home (“Why Covid-19...” 2020, p.12).

Census 2011 estimates indicate 56 million interstate migrants, of whom about 40 million are in urban areas with 85% of these in informal sector employment (Kumar, 2020, p. 14).The informal sectorworkers employed as daily wagers in small factories, at roadside eateries, as farm labourers or as providers of cheap services as petty entrepreneurs, waste-pickers, cleaners, sweepers, domestic helpers, other low cost service providers. Deshingakar and Akter (2009) estimate that circular migrantscontribute up to 10% of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) in India. Yet, they have remained part of the underbelly, largely invisible and taken for granted as a workforce feeding the economy. According to Economic Census 2013-14 (the latest available), 72% of all enterprises in India are Own Account Enterprises (OAE) that provide subsistence income to an average family (Panagariya, 2020, p. 10). One may also assume that



these are those who have less work security, decent work and living conditions and social security protection.

The 2011 census estimates put 22% Indians below the poverty line (inability to spend at least Rs. 1500 per capita per month to fulfill basic needs). The real blind-spot, however, is the millions that float just above the poverty line and can easily plunge below it under the slightest hint of a long drawn out crisis. Then there are those vaguely defined as ‘lower middle class’, a big chunk of whom are self-employed as small entrepreneurs or part of the gig economy (cab drivers, delivery boys for online services, etc.) who could easily slip into poverty as the lockdown extends.

While migrant workers were always there we never ‘looked’ at them, rather looked through them. Our hearts palpitated as the exodus started and their teeming numbers hit our widened eyes – at once alarmed and concerned. (Would they come back? Would they transmit the ‘Bad C’? What would happen if our economy collapsed for want of workers?). No one asks, ‘Why do they have to go so far to seek employment? Why can’t they get jobs where they come from? “And, when (and if) they eventually return and the ‘migrant labour problem’ is resolved to our satisfaction, will we again “put them out of our mind and out of our sight, and render them invisible once more?” (Suraiya, 2020, p.16). Baxi (2020) writes, “The phenomenon of the COVID-19 migrant on the move was all about the senseless social suffering that thingified human beings and converted their suffering into commodities in markets of governance, justice, development, and human rights.”

The motivation for this paper has come from a stark realization that for the middle class, though the lockdown has been difficult but largely, not life and livelihood threatening. But the “migrants” have faced an upheaval which they had little time to prepare for with virtually no back up resources to fall back on. Also, in the tendency to homogenise ‘migrants’ the layers of vulnerability do not show up. Thus we decided to focus on specific sectors and document the feelings, experiences and the ways in which these sectors have perceived and also experienced the pandemic and lockdown, their conditions after more than four months and how this has impacted on their livelihoods, basic entitlements and also their relationships with those who use their services. We have also tried to capture perceived impacts of the long-term uncertainties created by COVID and its related repercussions, their fears and anxieties about the possible future of ‘living with COVID. The approach used is reflexive interpretative, using their narratives (Pulla& Carter, 2018).

Locations, sectors and methodology

The two locations of this study are Pune Metropolitan Region (PMR) and Sangli city in Western Maharashtra consisting of Kolhapur, Sangli, Satara, Pune and Ahmednagar districts. Western Maharashtra, also called the Pune Administrative Division, is considered to be relative



better off as compared to other regions of Maharashtra though there is a vast area that is drought prone and has been traditionally known for outmigration to cities like Mumbai and Pune. PMR comprising of Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) and Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC) has a population of about 5.5 million as per 2011 Census. Sangli— actually Sangli Miraj Kupwad city —is the headquarters of Sangli district and has a population of little more than 0.5 million (2011 Census). We chose these sites for the paper mainly because of our familiarity with both these locations.

Three work sectors were selected for the paper: Waste pickers, Sex Workers and Domestic Workers. The justification for selection of these sectors is that they are largely female centred and in the entire discourse and media projections of migrants very little of gender visibility and focus were seen. The authors (particularly author 1) have been associated with the organisations working with these sectors. We therefore felt that the insights and sensitivity we have acquired through our engagement would enrich the paper.

Three sets of interviewees were purposively selected from each sector: the sector workers, field activists/worker representatives, and key activists from the core group. The first two sets of respondents were largely interviewed through Zoom meetings or telephonic calls. The key activists of all organisations and field coordinators of the waste picker union responded through e-mails, followed up with phone calls for clarifications and detailing. Some organisations also shared their documented material. The organisations that participated in the conversations include Sangram (Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha) and VAMP (Veshya AIDS Muquabla Parishad – a Community Based Organisation and a collective) - both operating from Sangli but their work spread across Southern Maharashtra and northern Karnataka; KKPKP (Kagad Kaach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat, a sector specific union) and SWaCH (Solid Waste Collection and Handling Cooperative of waste pickers established by KKPKP); Saheli Sangh (Sex workers' collective in Pune); PZGKS (Pune Zilla Gharelu Kamgar Sanghathan,) an organisation of domestic workers. Choice was given to reveal or keep the names anonymous.

Understanding the Sectors

Although there is a predominance of women as the frontline workers in their respective sectors, they are often at the bottom of a hierarchical arrangement. Many amongst them are the key income earners for their households and de-facto household heads. Additionally, sex work and waste picking are stigmatised in the social perception, the workers often viewed as carriers of disease and vices. Apart from being low on education and skills for upward mobility, a large section amongst these also belong to the lower caste categories. A large section of domestic workers and waste pickers migrated to urban areas during the all Maharashtra drought of 1972, mainly from the agriculturally and socio-economically backward regions. According to Kiran Moghe of AIDWA (All India Democratic Women's Association) who is also a core guiding



activist of PZGKS, domestic workers constitute the largest number of urban working women providing cheap labour services to middle class and elite households.

These sections are low wage earners, with insecurity of tenure and not mandatorily covered by social security measures. Lack of legal recognition of these sectors as productive ‘workers’ is also a major impediment in asserting their rights. For sex workers this non-recognition is quite stark. The last comprehensive report by the government on unorganized sector (NCEUS, 2007), known as the Arjun Sengupta Committee report, covers women workers in some detail. But in non-farm workers, waste pickers (and sex workers) are completely left out while domestic service workers find some mention as a statistic (*ibid*, p. 85) and in a boxed discussion, where they are specified as a category of migrants “most being at the risk of exploitation and human rights abuse” (*ibid*, p. 86).

Sex Work

Being a criminalized and socially and morally stigmatized work sector, it is a ‘hidden’ occupation that includes women, men and transgender persons – some working from home, but most women, including housewives, clandestinely in lodges, hotels and in brothels. Due to the risk of raids and rescue operations and social stigma they are not willing to come forward and access services provided by government. They also move frequently to escape identification by family or for better earning opportunities. In the absence of documentary identity or address proofs they are not eligible for government schemes. The stigma attached to sex work exposes them to violence in personal spaces from family members, including intimate partners. They are not considered as a “normal” family unit, because they may not be living within traditional marriage arrangements or with their family members. Given the precarious nature of their livelihoods very few have assets or savings to fall back upon, they resort to borrowing from moneylenders or brothel keepers at exorbitant interest rates. Inability to pay rents can result in their displacement. Their living conditions and occupation make them vulnerable to many co-morbidities including HIV and the resultant vulnerabilities to immune-suppressant diseases. Alcohol and drug dependency, mental health issues and suicidal tendencies during periods of extreme stress are serious concerns in the current scenario.

Waste pickers

The sector consists of doorstep collectors, itinerant pickers and the scrap traders. The first has the larger section of women who pick up the wastes from households and housing societies. Itinerant pickers collect recyclable waste from houses as well as roadside bins and outside commercial establishments, hospital waste and so on. In the PCMC area, understanding the lucrative nature of the recycling trade, private companies have obtained contracts and waste pickers are now deprived of their independent wealth from recyclables and choice of work areas and are labourers recruited by contractor agents for these companies. Now they are



earning wages that are far lower than what they could earn as self-employed workers, are dependent on contractors to carry out their work, have very limited social security coverage and no work security. In the PMC area they work through their union which has also arranged for their health insurance and runs a credit society. Their work involves collection, segregation and transport of non-recyclable waste and loading of compostable waste in municipal *ghanta gadis* (the garbage collection trucks that jingle bells as they approach each area). The waste pickers also collect the garbage in urban slum settlements and shanties which are partially paid by the residents and partly subsidised by the PMC. During the lockdown with toiling migrants unemployed or having left the city, their wages in the urban settlements were drastically curtailed and still not compensated by the municipal corporations. The doorstep collectors earn a fixed rate of Rs. 70 per household, while the contract workers get paid Rs. 11000 to Rs. 12000 per month. During the lockdown older waste pickers and those in containment zones suffered wage losses due to restrictions on their movement. The nature of their occupation makes them vulnerable to chronic skin, respiratory and lung diseases as well as stomach ailments, urinary tract infections etc. During lockdown period, being part of the essential services, they continued working braving the risks of getting infected.

Domestic Workers

Servicing the entire gamut of households, from mid-middle classes to the elite classes, these migrant workers are a mixed group with no or low education to a few who may have gone up to middle or high school level. Relative to the other sectors, they have a more sustained income source, though most do not earn enough unless they work in multiple households. They work as floor cleaners, dishwashers, do the laundry, cooking, are caretakers of children, senior citizens or families having special needs members. Depending on the nature of their work, the number of households they service and hours they can expend, and the geographical area where they work, they earn anything between 3000 -15000 rupees a month. Though PZGKS has tried to negotiate for Rs..900for each job in an average sized house and family, the sector workers say that they often settle for much less particularly when they have worked long years for a family and get some ‘fringe’ benefits such as educational support for their children, occasional medical support, interest free loans during crises or other major expenses and periodically leftover food to carry home. A section of domestic workers’ families who have been in Pune for years and have had regular, multiple income sources also own homes in urban *vastis* (slum settlements) or chawls. Many are single (widowed or deserted) women or those with alcohol dependant husbands or sons. None of them have workplace security or other forms of welfare security.

Narrations from the field Lockdown: Feelings and Impacts

Initial feelings across the board were that this is a temporary but necessary measure to control the spread of the pandemic. Ayeeshabi, carrying out sex work in and around Miraj said, “I

didn't even know what the word lockdown means. I had been away for a few days and only understood that 'Janata Curfew' had been announced and thought it is a matter of a day or two. I was on my way back from Bangladesh that day, in transit at Delhi airport, and I could sense something is happening. It took us an entire day to get our clearance out of the terminal. So, my only thought was to get back as soon as possible to Miraj".

Amruta, a transgender (TG), associated with Sangram and VAMP concurs, "Initially we took it casually, thought of it as a temporary thing" Kiran said, "Sangram had started preparing us for COVID through videos and zoom meetings since early February and had advised us to stock up and also on precautions to be taken in carrying out our *dhandra* (business), but none of us were prepared for the sudden announcement of this kind of a lockdown". "Everything was closed and streets were deserted. It created so much fear and anxiety and media channels just enhanced these feelings," said Maya.

Domestic workers and waste pickers, being long time settled migrants, did not think of going to their native villages unless there was greater risk due to COVID outbreak in their *vastis*. A few domestic workers went back for some time to work on their farmlands but were afraid of losing their employment. Most waste pickers (unless locked into containment zones) continued to work as frontline workers.

Most sex workers with organizational backing stayed on as they felt it would be riskier to go back in the absence of alternate livelihoods. Some also knew about the conditions back in their home states and didn't want to get trapped there due to stringent lockdown measures and COVID risks. A few did go back, particularly when they realized that lockdown would be prolonged. Despite distribution of rations and food packets, sustaining themselves with added medical expenses, rents, fuel, etc. was impossible without any income. Some who had small children back at home would feel distraught when the children cried asking to meet them. The fear of death compelled some to leave as they felt "rather than starve and die here, let me die amidst my family members". Ayesha narrated the long drawn online processes to get travel clearance for sex workers from Bengal, which took almost twenty days. S, from Saheli said that sex workers from across the border had to be taken from Kolkata by paying agents but the local police station was very helpful in filling the online forms, getting the various clearance documents and helping transport women to the station. Sarita (Counsellor at Sangram) shared the difficulties in getting transport to ferry the women to their villages in Karnataka as did I. from Saheli. Raju (peer from VAMP) and his partner Maya (a sex worker) also shared that when one of the VAMP sex workers from Karnataka died by suicide, they had difficulty in getting an ambulance to transport her body to the village as the drivers were afraid of police harassment at Karnataka borders. Finally, one of the sex worker's partner borrowed a friend's ambulance and drove the body to her place saying, "We have to do this for our own people, don't we!". The concept of 'community' as a closely knit functional group of kinship comes

through -- from their describing themselves as ‘community’ and brothel as ‘*ghar*’ (house) and all from geographic communities outside this as ‘non-community’.

Not all had a pleasant experience once back at their villages. They reported being quarantined far from the village and feared that they may die without meeting their families. Some faced discrimination from neighbours and family members as potential carriers and experienced the humiliation of food being pushed towards them, or thrown from a distance “like in earlier caste system, fear has created distances” said Rekha, a domestic worker. “Even during the HIV pandemic there was not the kind of discrimination as we face today!” said Kiran. In some cases, family members said, “You will bring the disease to us”. “What will you earn here? Go back”. When alternative farm or other employment was difficult to sustain, once lockdown was partially lifted, some came back, but faced hurdles in entering their brothels. Amruta, narrates, “A TG from Kolhapur went home to Dhule and prior to returning, 15 days later, despite having a COVID free certificate when he returned, his house said that he must stay in quarantine outside and take another swab test. Since the lab misplaced the swab, he got no reports for 9 days and rumours spread that he was COVID positive. The peers had to make a lot of noise at the hospital to get a fresh test done showing he was COVID negative. Even then the house preferred that he stay outside for the mandatory 14 days. Such is the fear” M., a former *devadasi* (temple slave) and now a sex worker tried waste picking for some days in the city outskirts. She said, “Going up and down, carrying the waste was so tiring. After four days I fell sick due to fatigue. So, I stopped and came to borrow some money and get food from Saheli”.

All sector workers talked about the growing stress as lockdown was prolonged and fear welling up due to rumours of the spread of COVID. Access of health services for chronic ailments such as HIV, diabetes, blood pressure, heart problems and reproductive and child health services etc., was limited due to lack of public transport and also perceived to be hazardous (fear of getting infected by COVID). For sex workers Saheli and Sangram arranged to obtain medicines in bulk from the Civil hospitals in the cities of their operations for ART. The non-brothel-based sex workers were not easy to access, unless they contacted the field workers themselves. In such cases, sex workers who were accessible and lived nearby were the via media to pass on information, messages and ration kits.

Field activists/workers/peers (as they are called in sex work) are the key links with sector workers. Direct contact was not possible so technology was used – phones, video calls, zoom meetings. Later, small corner meetings were conducted, keeping physical distance and using masks. But they missed the face to face meetings. Liaison work with authorities to represent sectoral issues posed many hurdles of accessibility and response. Frequent calls, messages were used and petitions were sent by organizations to represent their sector worker interests.

Support Systems and Gaps

The types of support needed can be grouped as follows:

- Information updates and precautionary guidelines with safety kits
- Addressing food and medicine shortages
- Dealing with financial emergencies
- Negotiations with service users
- Removing hurdles through liaison with government authorities
- Supportive counselling to deal with stress created by fear and anxieties caused by the uncertain conditions and prolonged confinement
- Arranging for travel back to native places for those who were desperate to go

All sector workers unanimously said that their organisations were the strongest support systems during this entire period with respect to all the above. Organising dry rations kits and packed cooked food supplies, essential medications in collaboration with Civil hospitals, petitioning to government authorities and the judiciary to address sector specific concerns and mobilising networks, both for funds and other resources as well as to create pressure lobbies to get quick responses were some of the strategies invoked. An important component, along with all these, was creating messaging groups by using digital technology and social media – organisational core group having regular conference meetings with field workers and these with sector workers. These helped not only to provide updated and scientific information, but also monitor and set up immediate response teams to address problems faced by sector workers. For example, Shrenik shared, “KKPKP runs a telephonic helpdesk where members call and register their grievances and a *karyakarta* (activist) responds to the grievance within 24 hours and then a plan is chalked up. Maitreyi said KKPKP arranged for life insurance cover to 8331 waste pickers since July 2020.

Saheli Sangh talked about the help from police personnel on various aspects, right from cutting back on raids to distribution of food and rations and to help in online procedures for transport of inter-state travellers. Meena (heading VAMP and Sangram) talked about over 4000 sex workers receiving support in their work areas of Sangli, Miraj, Karad, Satara, Kolhapur and adjacent areas in Karnataka till the end of June 2020. They also advocated for the right of unstopped treatment for HIV affected by petitioning in the High Court of Maharashtra for relaxation of government guidelines of personal check up for continuing treatment of 3rd line ARV patients in partnership with Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), Mumbai. The Court thereby issued urgent relief directives to the State AIDS Control Society to relax these guidelines so that 3rd line ARVs would be made available in the districts.

PZGKS addressed hurdles in getting access to rations through PDS (public distribution system) and distributed ration kits to their own sector workers as well as out of state migrants living in the *vastis* who had no organisational backing. Common citizens, some employers also gave a



helping hand. Hence, despite loss of work and a huge drop in incomes, these migrant workers and their families have been able to prevent starvation till now. Having organizational ID cards certainly helped the sector field workers reach relief material into *vastis*/brothel lanes once relief work was organized. But, as Kiran Moghe shared, given the suddenness of the announcement and subsequent hoarding, lack of wholesale stock due to sealing of borders and time needed to mobilize funds, arrange logistics, it took at least 2-3 weeks before relief could be organized by civil society groups in and around Pune.

Access to officials paved numerous hurdles, as Shrenik and Sandhya (KKPKP) shared: “Getting in touch with the administration became more difficult. Responses from the government machinery became slower. While this has always been the case, *karyakartas* could meet with officials and local municipal authorities. Due to the pandemic, entry within these buildings had become almost impossible”.

As the lockdown prolonged, mental health issues and the potential for increased violence have emerged as a serious concern, particularly in the sex work and, to some extent in the domestic worker sector. In Sangli, the signs became visible early into the lockdown when one member of VAMP committed suicide unable to cope with the uncertainty caused by the epidemic, loss of income and a fight with her partner. Meena said, “Since then the team continuously monitors community members, keeps them occupied through discussions, counselling, small activities, signature campaigns, discussions with the local district officials – to prevent them falling into depression”. Tejaswi heading Saheli talked about instances of intimate partner violence on sex workers as both face the frustration of continuous unemployment and also street fights. “Loss of income to small shopkeepers in the red-light area is leading to many incidences of arguments quarrels and even physical fights with sex workers especially the *pan-bidi* (betel leaves and cigarette) shopkeepers and small tea shops”.

Another form of violence is that of taking away the right to their work. Abolitionists (who reduce sex work to an issue of ‘immoral’ trafficking) and some sections of politicians are using the pandemic as an opportunity to shut down the red-light areas, “because for them it's never a vote bank but definitely used to be a money bank and now complete loss of income in the red light area made them ignore the needs of sex workers”. Meena emphasized, “VAMP’s own HIV prevention programs reveals that 70% of sex work happens outside red-light areas, on the streets, lodges, hotels, homes etc.” Relevant to mention here is a non – peer reviewed modelling research from Harvard and Yale that recommended shutting down Red Light Areas to control the spread of COVID, sell the land and use the proceeds of land sale to rehabilitate sex workers. The study has been strongly criticised and questions raised on its assumptions, methodology, and not adhering to ethical guidelines. In response to a strong letter written by activists, academicians, lawyers and feminists, the Dean of Yale has stated that it would review the research. The aspect of the lucrative prospects of real estate in the heart of the city may

certainly be in the mind of such stakeholders. Ignoring sex workers as migrant workers also creates setbacks while developing safety-net policies. Tejaswi points out, “Non recognition of sex work as work or a service and criminalization make it very difficult to recognize them as migrants even though more than 95% of the sex workers are migrants”. Meena asks, “Is there a difference between de-stigmatising sex workers and sex work or are they inseparable or is the former dependent on the latter? If the issue of right to sex work is complex and a more contested space, can one deepen the strategies to de-stigmatise sex workers such that the work that they do also can get legitimacy?”

Kiran and Saraswati (PZGKS) say that the non-availability of alcohol could possibly have reduced violence but there is also the possibility of under-reporting of overt violence as seeking organisational help to lodge FIRs is not so easy through distance communication. But women express feeling burdened with excessive housework load and the family crowded into small spaces. They also miss the peer interaction during and between work and home commutes.

The most important benefit of organisational connection was perceived to be the information dissemination systems that were channelized “This helped us to take precautions and also assert when there was denial of services”. Since there are no comprehensive authentic databases of migrant workers in each sector, organisations used the lockdown period to generate their own database. Saraswati said, “We filled 7000 forms of domestic workers in Pune for 0 balance accounts (a provision initiated by the central government for creating a *jandhan* (public wealth) account of the poor for direct cash transfers) and sent a petition to the government for depositing Rs. 10,000 in each account every month. We could not take out *morchas*(demonstrations); so, we held placards and took photos and sent these to the Collector”. PZGKS activists estimate that that by the 5th month after lockdown domestic workers have got back between 20-50% of their former jobs but nobody has got back to full employment. “Initially, all of us were completely caught off guard by the announcement and even more so as no-one knew that it would last this long. Initially, all caught on to this quite soon and also realized that domestic workers could face stigma as COVID virus carriers. So, in April we made petitions to the government about PDS, cash transfers and also that an order be passed that if employers want their domestic helpers back Housing Society Managing Committees cannot impose restrictions if both are in non-containment areas. A government order in May did mention this and the union was getting calls from elderly, single women and women with small children to help them to get their workers back” (Kiran).

Other issues addressed on behalf of waste pickers and domestic workers by their respective organisations were negotiations for wage protection, not being laid off from work and the entitlement of right to work. Additionally, the importance of compensation to waste pickers as frontline essential workers is also being negotiated with municipal authorities. The nature of work of sex workers poses special risks bringing it to a virtual standstill. And likely to continue

for much longer. Here continued access to safety nets for the next six months to a year is being advocated.

During relief efforts many shared experiences that betrayed insensitivity and humiliation under the pretence of magnanimity. Workers across sectors lamented the lack of humaneness amongst certain sections of the “so called ‘clean’ society”.

The common view that emerged from all sectors was that the government did not make enough prior preparations, the announcement of lockdown was too sudden and there was uncertainty about its duration. This did not give people enough time to prepare themselves and consideration for migrant workers was entirely absent. Rekha said, “It was the end of the month, wages were pending; we could not even borrow. We did not imagine it would be for so long; .it has been a very difficult time and we feel at a loss to decide priorities” the much-touted government relief schemes were not easily accessible, nor adequate. A well-informed Kiran (Sangram) articulates, “We hear World Bank has given 75000 crores to the government and PM (Prime Minister) Care Fund has received 9000 crores for dealing with COVID pandemic; also, that the Global Fund has allocated 150 crores for relief work, including providing care for people living with HIV. We, as sex workers, are saying give us just 35 crores and we will take care of all sex workers. You have an ocean of funds; give us just one ‘tambya’ (a tumbler full). Your ocean will not dry up with this!” The sex workers said that if allocations go directly to CBOs, they would use funds more judiciously in keeping with the needs of their sectors.

Immediate and Long-Term Impacts on Work and Livelihood

All sectors have faced income losses to various extents. While sex workers’ earnings came down to 10-20%, for domestic workers it appears that barely 20% have received salaries for all months, 50-60% received salaries for two months while 20-25% have received no salaries after March. Waste picker have also lost wages as contract workers in PCMC areas when they lost days of work in the initial period of lockdown due to non-availability of public transport or when their areas came under containment zones. In the PMC areas, with many scrap dealers shutting shop and no place for storage near their homes, waste pickers have either walked miles to dump them or sold them almost at 50% of the earlier prices. Those who are doorstep collectors in housing societies got their regular wages, but their incomes from the collection at *vastis* dropped drastically. One waste picker said she earned a meager Rs. 500 in the entire month and those who are itinerant pickers have earned barely 2000-3000 rupees during the lockdown period (a come down from Rs. 11000– Rs. 15000).

Sex workers and domestic workers are staring at the prospect of unemployment or reduced employment, despite the partial lifting of lockdown. The anxiety is that with the economic slowdown wage/income cuts are inevitable, and with growing unemployment, negotiation for just wages could become difficult. Kiran Moghe suggests that the situation calls for bringing



in an Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme in the lines of MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act which establishes the right to work and state's obligation to provide employment) to address the likelihood of galloping urban unemployment and its resultant socio-economic impacts.

The lockdown has been partially relaxed in some places but the life of migrants is still far from normal; their work insecurity and economic vulnerability is likely to continue for some more time. For sex workers their vulnerability due to direct contact work is more pronounced. Virtual sex has been tried as an alternative but the experience has been precarious. There have been frauds in e-payments. It was reported that a customer video graphed the virtual session and then threatened the woman that if she did not pay him Rs. 35000 he would let the video go viral. The sex workers are faced with the stress of not being able to reveal to their families why they can't get back to work till a vaccine becomes accessible. Domestic workers also reported that though their employers have not clearly fired them, "they are still not calling us back". In many housing societies, particularly the gated ones, the Managing Committees have passed resolutions disallowing domestic helpers from entry. Maitreyi (KKPKP) added, "A huge concern has been the uncertainty regarding the collection of waste. In some pockets waste pickers have been told by the residents not to show up for work, as they carry the risk of transmission. In others, they are not allowed to leave their pockets. In yet others, PMC has announced they will do the collection themselves".

An Uncertain Future: Anxieties and Fears

Fear and anxiety are the recurrent themes in the conversations – fear about contracting the disease, fear of starvation, fear of death of loved ones, fear about falling ill. In Rekha's words, "We are constantly living in fear; don't know when it will end. When I hear someone is diagnosed with COVID I fear I will also get it. The constant fear can lead to blood pressure and heart problems. We feel tension about even getting cough, fever." Tejaswi, who had been handling S's hospitalization and care, is asymptomatic but afraid to get herself tested – "With COVID cases now emerging in one of the brothel lanes and our losing S to it, there is so much to do to prevent panic and re-organize things. I can't let the Collective collapse under the grief of losing S-tai (*tai* is a word that signifies elder sister) and the fear of COVID spreading. I am emotionally broken, but have to strive just to keep the Collective afloat..." problems. We (KKPKP) laments, "We are struggling to educate our children so that they have better opportunities to break out of our life cycles. I dream to see my sons in settled employment as officials. But the loss of our income could affect their education". Supriya adds, "I am afraid that if our children's education stops, they could fall prey to bad elements just waiting to pounce on them and mislead them". Many expressed fear to plan for a distant unknown future. "What do we plan for and how? Uncertainty is the only certainty. So, we have to live each day as it comes" was the constant refrain.



Conclusion

The discussions in the earlier sections have highlighted the range of issues the migrant workers have had to grapple with during lockdown. These have long term implications which require a partnership that brings to public attention the need for sensitivity to not only understand the layers of vulnerability amongst migrants but also the recognition of their human rights as citizens and respect for their immense contribution to society and economy. Mainstreaming the discourse on migrants to render them visible requires the building of strong campaigns and movements. This necessitates formation of a pan-Indian alliance of migrant workers consisting of trade unions, and representation of each sector's associations/networks and NGOs working on migrant issues. Collective multi-pronged strategies are needed to build up a pressure lobby whereby migrants get their entitlements by right and not as pieces of benevolent charity.

An important point to consider is that in a majority of migrant families, even if there are multiple income earners, they are mostly employed in the informal sector, a large chunk of which have had livelihood setbacks during the lockdown. Yet alternative employment measures (even those offered as 'rehabilitative' packages) for all these sectors are non-viable, given their limited skill sets and their livelihood needs to fend not only for themselves but also their families. In the absence of legislations that identify their presence and specify their rights, these work sectors are compelled to look for spaces within existing legislations to negotiate for their rights. A comprehensive sector wise database, created in partnership with organizations working on the ground, could be the first step towards their registration. The demand for decriminalization of sex work is also essential. The approach also needs to change towards a more nuanced approach by looking at each sector and the layers within each sector.

One of the glaring lacunae that emerged in COVID times has been the gross neglect of the public health care system to respond to pandemics. The imperative and urgent need to strengthen the public health care system for future inevitable calamities has to be a core policy shift.

While almost all agree that the lockdown may have been necessary, it was not made use of the way it should have been; it became draconian. Kiran Moghe opined, "You cannot control the pandemic by using authoritarian measures – coercion and instilling fear does not help. It should have been done with peoples' participation through people's education; these were singularly missing and is lacking till today." This is reiterated by Maitreyi who said, "There has been very little engagement of decision makers with organizations to discuss and address their sectoral issues during such periods -- the need for government to proactively discuss these issues regularly would help representatives and bureaucrats have a more nuanced understanding and have a convergent approach with respect to migrants".



Ayesha's words might as well sum up the sense of neglect, not only in the sector she represents, but other 'invisible' sectors where migrant workers' contributions are taken for granted: "This government has only been giving us *'jhatkas'* (jolts). While some people came forward to arrange transport for migrants as *'Samaj Seva'* (social work), nobody thought that migrants also include sex workers. Nor did media cover our issues while talking about migrant problems. So, I feel government, society and media all neglected us." Raju throws a last word to all of us, "Change your outlook towards us, your attitude will automatically change".

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