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AN ENDLESS MARCH

The Woes of Workers during COVID Lockdown

A Report By

CITIZENS FOR SOCIAL ACTION: VOLUNTEERS INITIATIVE

Introduction

It was indeed difficult to imagine that an experimental curfew for a single day on 22nd March 2020 would just be an initiation to a devastating period that was to follow afterwards. After the country went into Lockdown from 25th March 2020 everything began to spiral downwards. With different events unfolding in an episodic manner, through the extensions of the Lockdown, it became clear that the wrath of this State induced socio-economic devastation in response to the COVID 19 pandemic came down in its most severe manner upon the lower strata of society. Millions of laborers walking endless miles on highways made one realise the mismanagement and irrational procedure that went into implementing the Lockdown.

In his recent book, Frank M. Snowden, a historian, substantiates in an erudite manner how epidemics mirror society. He argues that an epidemic unmasks the layers that human beings are composed of and lays bare our relationship with mortality, life and most importantly with our fellow human beings.¹ The circumstances which have been brought upon us by a natural pandemic - COVID-19 – and social devastation – the Lockdown – has similarly exposed the precarities which engulf lives of migrants, women, children and all others who face discrimination and exploitation on a routine basis. Not only has the pandemic exposed the systemic inequities it has further intensified the effect of these inequities on the vulnerable population. Migrants have lost their livelihoods and have faced brutal police violence while making their way back home. Many have died with empty stomachs and unfulfilled dreams of seeing their close ones.² Women have lost their jobs and economic independence which enabled them to take progressive steps within these adverse social structures. Being confined to their homes, they have seen an increase in domestic violence upon women.³ Cases of sexual abuse have also witnessed a growth during the lockdown and helplessness in seeking justice has also been noted due to the crippling of the judicial

¹How Pandemics Change History. Url: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/how-pandemics-change-history>. Last Accessed on 10th June 2020.

²Non Virus Deaths. Url: <https://thejeshgn.com/projects/covid19-india/non-virus-deaths/>. Last Accessed on: 10th June 2020.

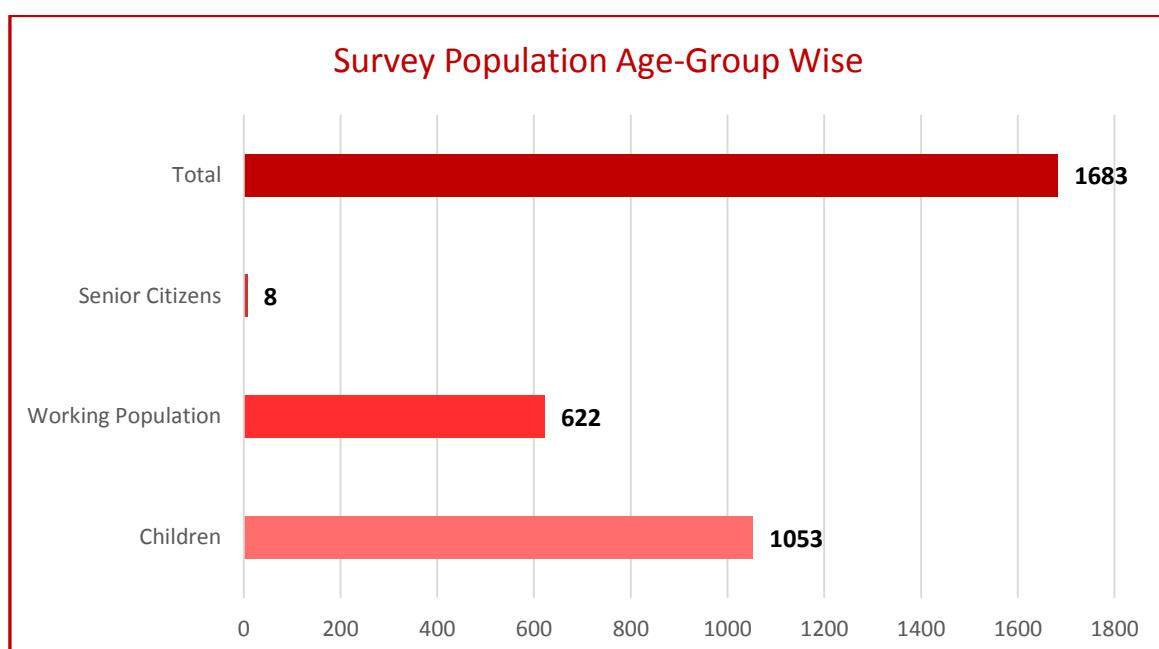
³Ayushi Agarwal, Domestic Violence in the Lockdown Has Been Aided by Govt Apathy. Url: <https://thewire.in/women/lockdown-domestic-violence-government>. Last Accessed on: 10th June 2020.

mechanism. The lockdown, till now, has left a trail of trauma on life of the poor, resulting from rampant incidents of class, caste and gender atrocities.

While a near complete withdrawal of State institutions, responsible for protecting the vulnerable, could be clearly seen, it also did not go un-noticed that there were stepped-up ameliorative efforts by individuals and organizations during the pandemic. The roles and responsibilities of these organisations and individuals can be broadly divided along three lines – relief work, access to justice and recording of narratives of atrocities – with each containing a plethora of work- within themselves. This report attempts to consolidate and communicate the narratives of atrocities that individuals had to face during the lockdown phase. The assessment of the impact of the Lockdown has been recorded through interactions carried out with around 530 families living in Ajmer district and also migrants that were passing through the district in an attempt to reach their homes. The report focuses on difficulties faced by women, children and migrant labourers during the Lockdown and also attempts to locate areas where complications may arise in future for them in an unsettled economy that will follow the Lockdown.

The Socio-Economic and Demographic Characteristics of the Study Area

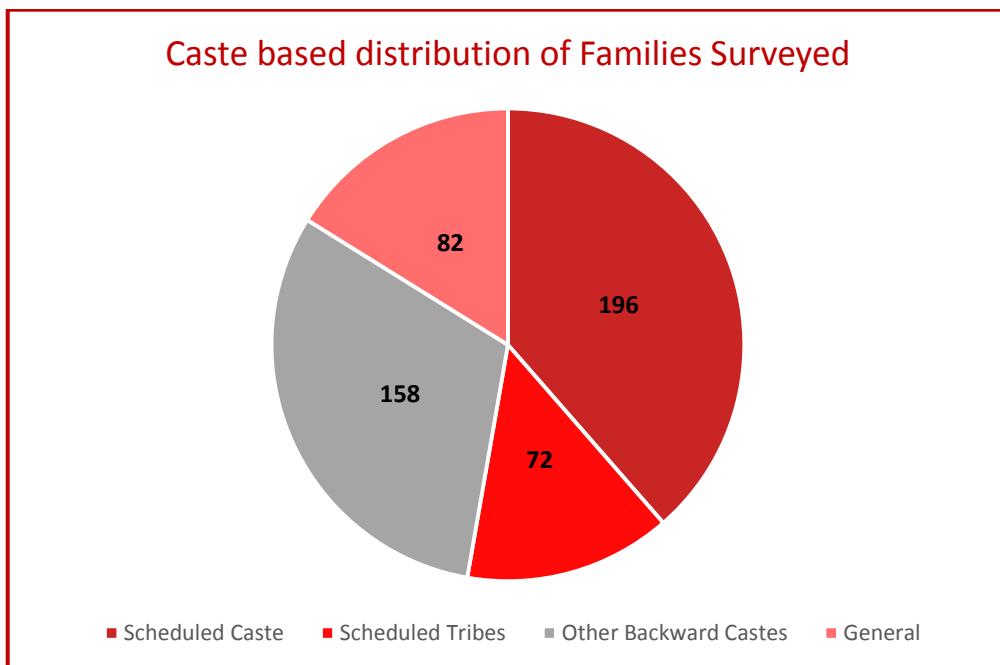
The survey helped in grasping the variegated profile of the study area and how the pandemic had affected individuals from these different profiles. The survey recorded information of around 1220 (with individuals from urban areas of Ajmer and rural blocks adjacent to it) individuals of which a significant proportion were children (around 60%). One of the ways to understand the effect of pandemic would be to classify this population according to levels of precarities that different age-groups were exposed to by the pandemic. According to observations made by World Health Organisation (WHO), it was understood that children and elderly people were the most vulnerable age-groups as a result of their less responsive biological resistance mechanism.⁴ The population survey in Ajmer consisted in bulk of these age-groups.



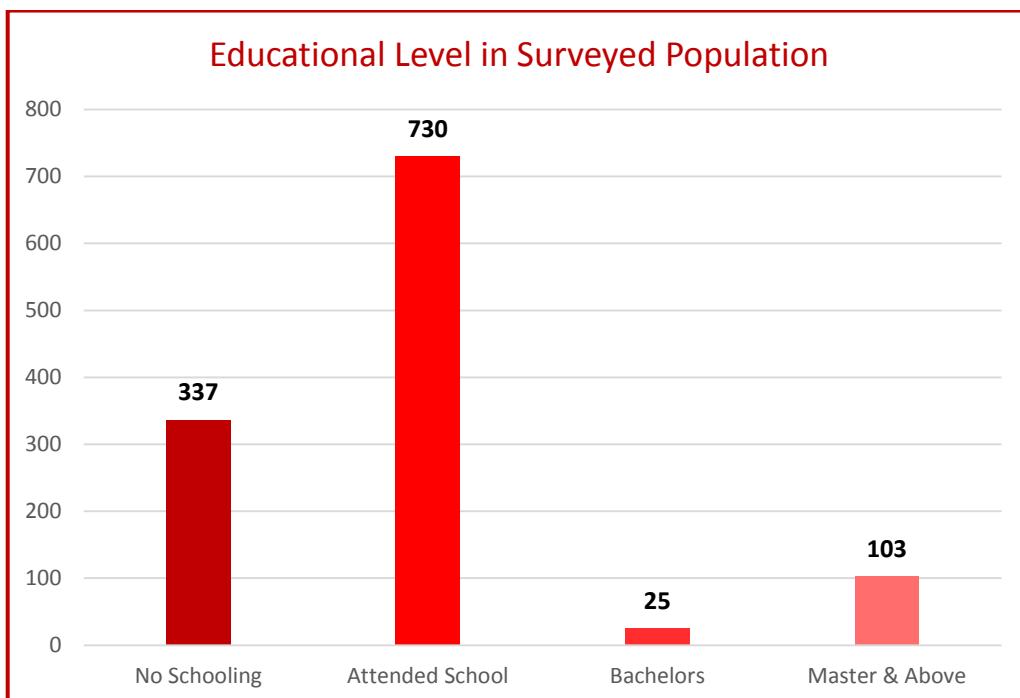
Thus, a recognition of this significant percentage of people in the vulnerable age-group in the district should have evoked a sense of added responsibility from the district administration. We look at this added responsibility in the following sections of the report. While one could recognize vulnerability of population through age-groups, it is possible, as done by many, to make a similar argument for vulnerability coming from an individual's socio-economic status. From the survey, it could be clearly seen that people who came from already marginalized caste-communities clearly outnumbered the privileged ones. From a total of 530 families that were surveyed, 426 families (around 79%) were from Schedules-

⁴World Health Organization, Older people are at highest risk from COVID-19, but all must act to prevent community spread. Url: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/statements/statement-older-people-are-at-highest-risk-from-covid-19-but-all-must-act-to-prevent-community-spread>. Last Accessed on: 10th June 2020.

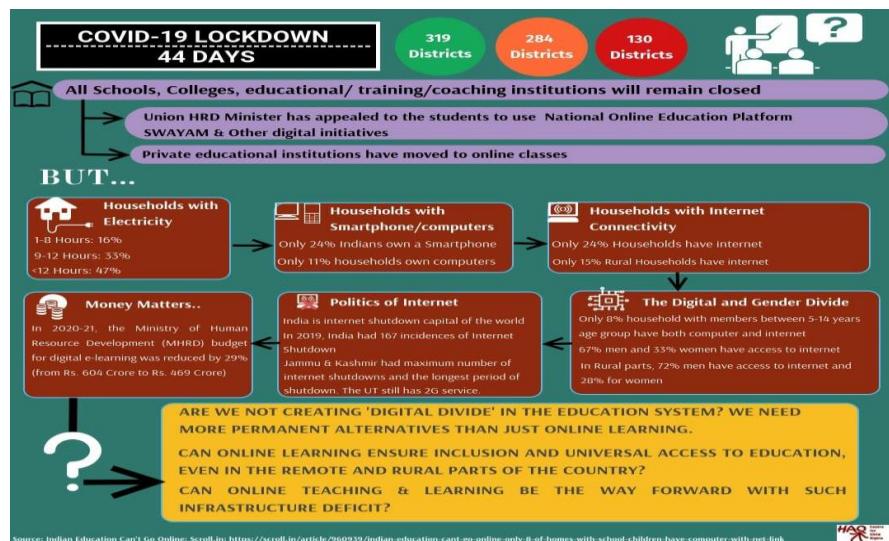
Caste, Scheduled-Tribes and Other Backward Castes as compared to only 82 families (21%) falling under the category of general castes.



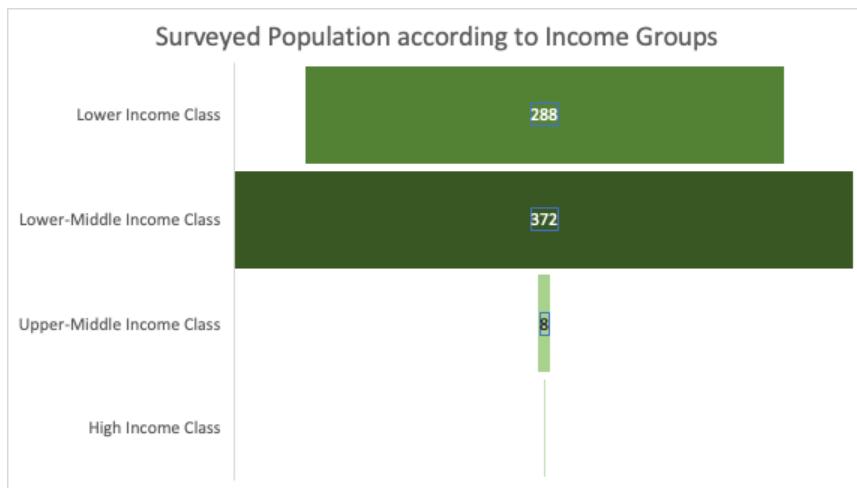
A major source for the deprived castes of uplifting themselves within caste-based hierarchies is in access to education. The educational indicator also revealed the very disturbing reality that very few individuals from these families could have an access to education. A majority amongst them had either never attended school or had to discontinue education at the school level. This trend is also not changing with recent generations. There were only 137 families, in recent times, out of 530 who were able to send more than one child to school.



It is understandable under such circumstances that the impact of lockdown, such as closing of schools in an arbitrary manner and adopting a new pedagogy of online classes, can only increase the vulnerabilities of the deprived children in times to come. One might wonder that with online-classes unavailable to the poor who will be responsible for these children losing out on their years of schooling. The answer to this lies in recognizing the inherent class-biases in terms of accessing technology by different people. Digitisation of education not only assumes availability of internet enabled electronic devices but also a tailor-made space within households where the child can sit in solitude and learn her lessons.



As revealed by the survey, a majority of the families lie in the lower rungs of economic-classes thereby allowing for an educated conjecture that this paradigmatic shift made by the State in the realm of education excludes a vast majority of children coming from such families.



Deteriorating Informal-Labour Conditions

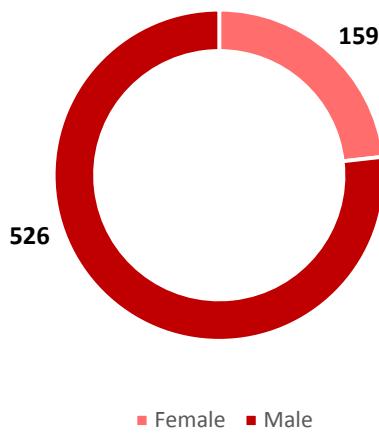
"State is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of legitimate use of physical force within a given territory"

Max Weber, *Politics as Vocation* (1918)

The implementation of lockdown has witnessed, as highlighted in the introduction, ruptures within the structures of the informal sector economy. Lockdown in very simple terms meant that all employment options for informal sector labourers had to be closed down leaving many of these labourers searching desperately for their survival options. It is possible to say that of the large number of migrant labourers, working in the informal-sector, faced with closure of their options of survival were not provided for by the State which instead of facilitating their survival or desire to reach back home, unleashed a regime of violence on them. Deprived of every possible means of sustenance, the labourers were subjected to lathi-charge at every district border and not allowed to move on national highways. If by a stroke of luck and over-coming all hurdles placed in front of them, the labourers were able to make their way back home, chemical disinfectants were sprayed over them after which institutional quarantine with bad facilities followed. With such physical, emotional and mental trauma from their journey, the lockdown has translated into a period of uncertainty and terror for the migrant labourers. On the other hand, labourers employed in the informal-sector in areas close to their homes have also suffered in relatively less but significant proportion due to the lockdown. As a result of their wages being held back by the employers and the insecurity of getting back their jobs, a situation has been created where the balance has tilted more towards the employers with the workers facing an escalation in exploitation by the employers. The stories of workers coming out from the survey are a microcosm of these very nightmares that have played out across the country.

The size of the working population covered by the Survey is around 683 individuals and a major proportion of working individuals, in the survey, were men (around 523) with women still having a significant presence of around 160 workers (around 25%).

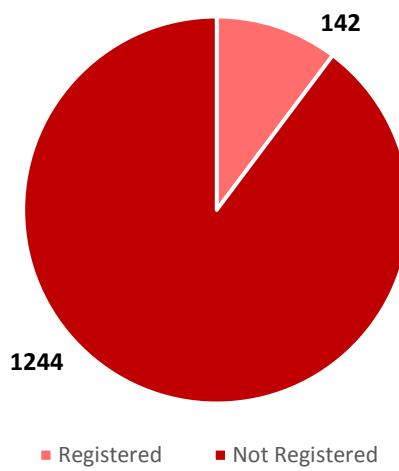
Working Population according to Gender



State of Migrant Workers in Lockdown

Endless miles to walk in deprived health conditions under the burning sun on concrete roads is the state which today the migrant workers find themselves in throughout the country. Migrant workers of different economic spheres are on the highways looking for means to get back to their homes because of uncertainties of finding a sustainable livelihood option. Similar scenarios were visible in Ajmer as well. In the survey it came out that a significant number of labourers in Ajmer were not registered with the district administration.

Registered Labour in Surveyed Population



A huge population of un-registered labour, which also consisted of migrant workers, translated into these people being deprived of security provided by labour laws which were extended by the State during the Lockdown. The repercussions of this on lives of labourers can be better understood through difficulties faced by a group of migrant agricultural labourers attempting to return to their homes during lockdown.

A group of 64 agricultural migrant workers were forced to undertake a journey of 800 kms after having no other option of survival left with them during the Lockdown. One sub-group of these workers had their homes in Guna district of Madhya Pradesh while the second sub-group had migrated from Jhalawar district of Rajasthan. They used to work in cumin field for a season and after performing labour for 1.5-2 months used to return to their homes. Earning around 300 rupees per day, whatever came as a saving was used for children's education, who used to stay back in the source district during migration. The children performed household chores while the parents went away and were kept under the guardianship of grandparents or other elders of the family. On 21st March 2020, the labourers came to know about a lockdown being imposed till the 14th of April and they decided to continue their work on fields till that time after which they could proceed to their homes. As 14th April drew closer the labourers got to know that the Lockdown would not be lifted anytime soon. Understanding the severity of the situation and their feebleness in managing to persist given the circumstances, the labourers decided to undertake the journey back home. At every step on their journey, the labourers were picked up by the police who kept them either in schools or provided them with vehicles to cross the district border. In places where they were kept in schools, proper food was not provided by the district administration thus forcing the labourers to sleep on empty stomachs. When vehicles were provided for their movement, the vehicles dropped them after a few kilometers leaving the workers to cover huge distances on foot without food and water. For every ride some charge from the workers was also collected by the vehicle owner. After crossing seven districts, the labourers reached Kekri where someone from Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti (a local organization) took notice of people sleeping in a temple. Thereon the migrant labourers were provided with decent shelter and food by the organization. Once the migrants settled down, the organization arranged for transportation which could take them to their respective districts.

On reaching their homes a migrant labourer called back to say:

"After working for 2 months in the field, every labourer had managed to save 18000 rupees. On the return journey and after facing so many hardships, every individual had to forego around 3000 from their savings. This has left every household, from which a couple had migrated to work, with a saving of 30000 rupees. Earlier this saving was invested in farming the patch of land owned by the family during the monsoon season and if there was no rain it would be used to run the household. Although it was an important source of income which used to carry the family through the year, after experiencing the hardships we went through this time, I have no intention of returning for migrant work. Whatever is offered to me at my native place I'll do for sustaining my family and if it's in our fate to die doing that then that cannot be changed."

While the group did have to face a lot of hardship on their journey back home, they were fortunate in ways the other groups of migrant labourers were not. Some groups were just stuck mid-way as a result of the State order to stop migrants wherever they are found. Such an irrational order led to violent regulation of the movement of migrants as was experienced by a group travelling from Gandhigram in Gujarat to Chapra in Bihar and were caught by the district administration of Kekri in Rajasthan.

This group of workers was an all-male group with ages ranging from 19 to 35 years. The primary purpose of their migration is to earn some quick money for constructing house, loan repayment, get someone from their family treated, to get their family member married etcetera. Their initial response to reports of lockdown was to stay at their workplace and spend the money that they had earned to survive till the lockdown got over. Things took a turn for worse when all the money they had earned started drying up leaving them with nothing to pay for house-rent or for procuring ration. On 25th March, the labourers decided to leave from Gujarat in a Minitruck that one fellow labourer owned and share the expense of diesel amongst themselves. Before setting out on this journey they were aware of stories about police brutality and decided to avoid as many police barricades as possible. All their efforts succeeded only till Gujarat border and they were forced to confront the district administration on reaching Kekri. The police at the district border took over the charge of

the vehicle and took them to a school nearby where they were medically examined and next day provided with some food and water through a local organization. They were told that 14 days of institutional quarantine had to be undertaken before they could be let out and in the meanwhile proper food would be given and also something for their recreation could be arranged. After a while, the migrants asked the authorities to permit them for continuing their travels as they just wanted to return home and none of them had any kind of symptoms. Their requests were to no avail and the authorities strictly denied any kind of travel that these migrants were thinking of undertaking. The quarantine which was to last for 14-days got converted into a forced confinement of 1.5 months. All other migrants who wanted to leave for nearby districts were let off slowly. Finally, on 3rd May 2020, the migrants were allowed to proceed towards their homes and reached Chapra on 5th May. A migrant on reaching home communicated

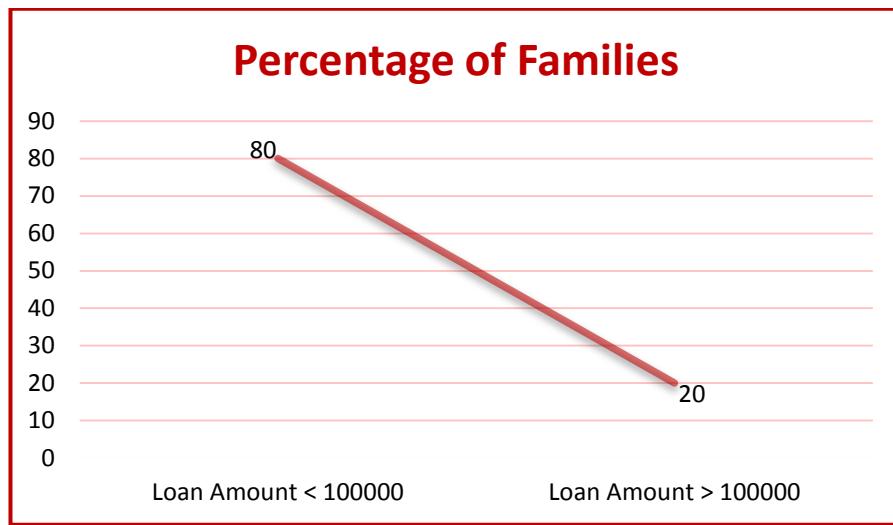
"I met everybody at home after finally returning to my native place after so long. The journey has made a serious dent on my earning as I had to spend around 3000 Rupees for coming back. I was kept in institutional quarantine for another 21 days in a school at my native place but I'm happy here as my known ones are close to me. From what happened to me it seems that the government does not want to get rid of the disease, it wants to get rid of the labourers"

The labourers who decided to stay back have also suffered in similar manners as no support – economically and materially – was provided to them by their contractors. The story of migrant labourers from Chhattisgarh employed at brick kilns in Ajmer sheds light on this aspect as well. Around 200 workers are employed at these brick kilns and they could not complete their seasonal work due to the Lockdown. In the initial phase the owner of the brick kiln gave them some wages which was barely sufficient to procure some ration for their families. After a few weeks passed, the workers demanded some advance which was flatly refused by the kiln owner saying that as they were not working in a regular manner, they had no right to ask for wages. Left with only a few days of ration, the workers requested that they should be allowed to move back to their homes in the source state i.e. Chhattisgarh. This was also not allowed by the district administration. A woman who works in one of these brick kilns shared:

"There is no provision of water here. From the past 6 days we have not been able to get rice. There is no stock of vegetables or any other ration. It would have been better if we were sent back to our homes. We cannot work here in a normal manner. To run our homes we have to regularly ask for loans. The brick kiln owner should have given us permission to leave for our homes. Our families must be waiting for us."

Another woman worker standing close by seconded the version of this woman. Listening to all these narratives, it would be no exaggeration to say that workers in any situation have been the worst sufferers during the Lockdown. Many of them have been coming continuously to the same places in-order to find some work, the only difference this time is that they have had to return with empty pockets and empty stomachs and that too with some stroke of luck. Where the luck has not favored the workers, their families still wait for their dear ones to arrive.

The lockdown has made a heavy dent on the income of the labourers which would adversely impact their ability to repay the loans they had taken previously. In the survey it was reported that close to 85% families had an unpaid loan on themselves. Majority of these loans were borrowed from informal sources such as relatives, neighbors or private finance companies with a few in exceptional cases being from Bandhan bank. For maximum number of these families the loan amount was less than one lakh rupees while close to 20% families had a loan amount of one lakh and upwards. The main reasons for procuring the loan were for marriage, for one's own treatment and to setup an independent enterprise. During the discussion with some of them, the team realised that the lockdown had put these families in a difficult position. On the one hand they had lost their jobs and were somehow managing to make ends meet from the savings and on the other hand the lenders were pressing for the loans to be repaid. The families stated that it would be impossible for them to repay the loan instantly after the Lockdown and it would at least take them some months after they manage to get their jobs back.



It would not be wrong to say that labourers have seen from the close the irresponsibility of the State and their employers and so with everything in flux their only resolve remains: to never come back for migrant work.

Trauma of Househelp Workers

Amongst the women labourers that the team came across, most of them worked as Househelp in areas adjacent to their own homes. The team interacted with 69 househelp workers who constituted around 16% of workers surveyed. A major proportion of them (41 out of 69) were the sole earners for their families while some (28 out of 69) came from families where some other family member was also employed. On an average the househelp workers would manage to bring a monthly income of Rupees 2000 after working for about 8-10 hours per day. Househelp work is already considered as an under-paid labour with labourers often finding it difficult to make ends meet, leading to frequent borrowing from informal sources. The lockdown has increased the precarities of househelp workers as revealed by the narratives of different people surveyed by the team.

Twenty six year old Rini (Name changed) is a single-mother with two young daughters and came to Ajmer from Dadri in Uttar Pradesh. With the death of her husband in Dadri, she was left with no other option but to perform some labour in order to fulfill the needs of her daughters. The entire family came to Ajmer and Rini found a job as a househelp nearby. She used to work in 6 homes and used to get a monthly income of Rupees 7000. Once the lockdown started, she received complete wages from just two families whereas the other 4

houses deducted 6-days of wages from her salary. The wages she received were spent on paying the house rent, electricity bill and fees for her daughter's education leaving almost no savings and very little to procure rations. In such dire circumstances she was left with no other option but to withdraw the money that she had been saving for some time now. All this happened when there was no assurance from her employers about her job protection. Her stock of ration finished in mid-April after which she has been finding it difficult to venture out and procure some ration. In between, she also had to ask for an advance of 2000 from one of her employers that has to be repaid within six-months from the time she resumes her work again. All this has led to a detrimental effect on her daughters' health, one of whom was an early-delivery. The dearth of food has hit the nutritional levels of the daughters. Rini also said that with the dream of providing her daughters with decent education she had enrolled them in a private school. Now as her savings are going down rapidly during the lockdown, Rini has to shift her daughters from the private school to a government one due to the high amounts of fees which are now well beyond her reach.

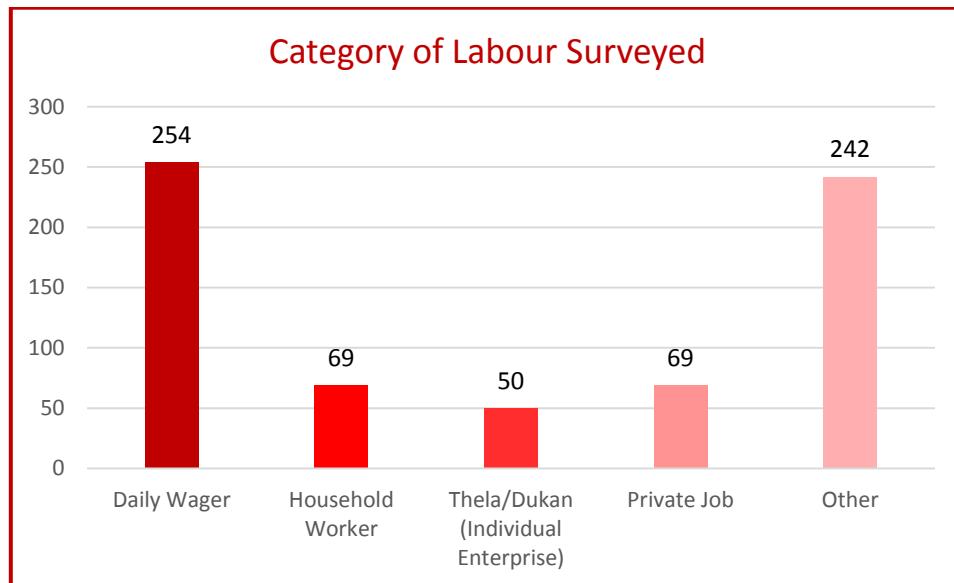
When all hopes were being washed away, Rini hoped that the State would at least help her with ration and other basic facilities. She could not access them on her own as she was not properly aware of different government schemes that were introduced during the lockdown and in the case of some, did not have proper documents to avail the facilities. All of a sudden one day she saw three people wandering in her neighbourhood. Rini recollects:

"These three people went from door-to-door asking about the number of people that resided in every house. They asked different kinds of questions: Has anyone come from outside? Is anyone down with fever? They recorded individuals' phone numbers and went away. We thought they were health workers checking for any symptoms of corona. Later in the evening I received a call from an unknown person saying that he loves me and wants to marry me. He even talked in an inappropriate manner to which I replied that I would complain against him to my Sister-in-Law. Listening to this he became very angry and replied that he would come right away and teach her a lesson. Fearing for my and my daughter's security, I have gone forward and registered a complaint with the police after which there has been no call. I still fear as to what will happen to us with such people around."

Househelp workers who are already in a state of economic deprivation have been further subjected to such mental harassment during the Lockdown. If a woman like Rini faces abuse

from men outside the confines of her home, individuals like Ankita (Name changed) face abuse from men within their households. Working as a househelp had helped Ankita settle down a bit and provide better care to her family members. Her husband's income completely goes away in consumption of alcohol. After the Lockdown, her source of income has been completely totally crippled making her dependent on the whims and fancies of her husband. Ankita says that her husband forces her to indulge in sex throughout the night and when she expresses her desire to sleep, he thrashes her badly. Forced by the context of the Lockdown to suffer the abuse unleashed by her husband, Ankita has sought some ration and dry food from her employers which are being used to feed her children.

Househelp workers have already lost their jobs and the mindset created by the pandemic, with all the focus on hygiene, restricts the possibilities of re-employment. It is not a distant possibility that their employers see househelp workers as carriers of corona especially as most of them are residents of congested slums of the city. In such circumstances, it becomes crucial for the State to step-up in a progressive manner to provide the basic facilities that women and their families need.



Traumatic Afterlife of Lockdown on Women and Children

The stories of Rini and Ankita in the previous section already gives us some sense of how women have been hit twice as hard by the lockdown as compared to their male counterparts. The first repercussion was experienced at their site of work from where a majority of them have been dismissed after the lockdown. Confined in their homes, the women find an added burden of not only catering to demands of more family members but to fulfill those demands with scarcity of materials. Around 70 percent women during the survey raised the issue of drying up of rations with no access to employment and with lesser amount of money they have to fulfill the increased demands of food from the family. Some women pointed out that even if they were to skip meals for one time during the day, they cannot expect the children to do the same. In cases where women have not been able to satisfy these needs, they have been subjected to domestic violence from the family members. A woman shared her experience:

"My husband and other family members keep asking me to prepare tea the entire day. Not only does it mean additional chores of washing dishes multiple times but also one needs to think how much milk can one get to prepare tea repeatedly throughout the day. If I am not able to provide him with tea, my husband gets irritated and picks up a fight with me. Sometimes this also results in physical abuse. But this is something that has been happening continuously and there is nothing new in this to talk about specifically. I know of several houses where similar things happen."

Her statement makes us realise the long lasting impact this Lockdown would have in reinforcing the patriarchal hierarchies within our social structure. There is a double burden with women being forced to submit to sexual demands against their will during this phase. Women with whom discussions were held in groups complained that under such situations the husband enforces his will for sexual pleasure on the women. This statement was corroborated by the cases of domestic violence which confirmed that this practice was also not something new and with husbands present in homes all the time this was bound to escalate. One is left thinking about all the efforts made by feminist movements to create a space for dialogue about such atrocities and make a headway in addressing some of these problems of patriarchal structure. With the mobility, economic freedom, body and voice

being sacrificed at the altar of this Lockdown, these movements have been pushed back under the current situation.

With the relationships within the family being severely hit during the Lockdown, the situation for children has also gone from bad to worse within homes. A lot of women shared that getting irritated as a result of continuous demand for food from children, they tend to slap them in order to quieten them down. The women also realise that the nutritional intake of children has been curtailed as a result of lesser rations available with the household. The younger children are not getting milk as a lot of that goes in preparing tea for other family members.

The Lockdown has also seen schools being closed down and this has led to children losing interest in education as such. A lot of women feel that they would be forced to shift their children to government schools as all their savings have dried up during the Lockdown and children would not receive proper education as a result. It was also observed that Anganwadi services were completely non-functional during the Lockdown. With the schools also not opening the girl children are finding it difficult to access sanitary pads. The siblings have also started fighting amongst each other as a result of getting irritated in over-crowded homes with less space for them to play. The team also found during the survey, that due to the Lockdown, the playing hours of children have been reduced to the minimum. The restrictions on stepping out of homes has a role to play in this for sure but a lot of parents are fearful of sending their children out as empty streets make children more vulnerable to sexual abuse. A grandmother shared with the team:

"We don't allow our children to go out. The environment outside is not conducive for them to roam around with safety. The roads are empty and in case someone does something in such circumstances it would be difficult to even know about it. Not just girls, even venturing out of homes for boys is not safe during the Lockdown."

A lot of mothers, sensing such dangers, encouraged the team members to discuss about 'good' touch and 'bad' touch with the children. While the concern for safety could be vividly sensed while talking to children, safety from sexual-abuse within homes was also something that the mothers remained worried about. Hence, to know the differences of touch was a crucial asset to provide space and language for children's muffled voices during the

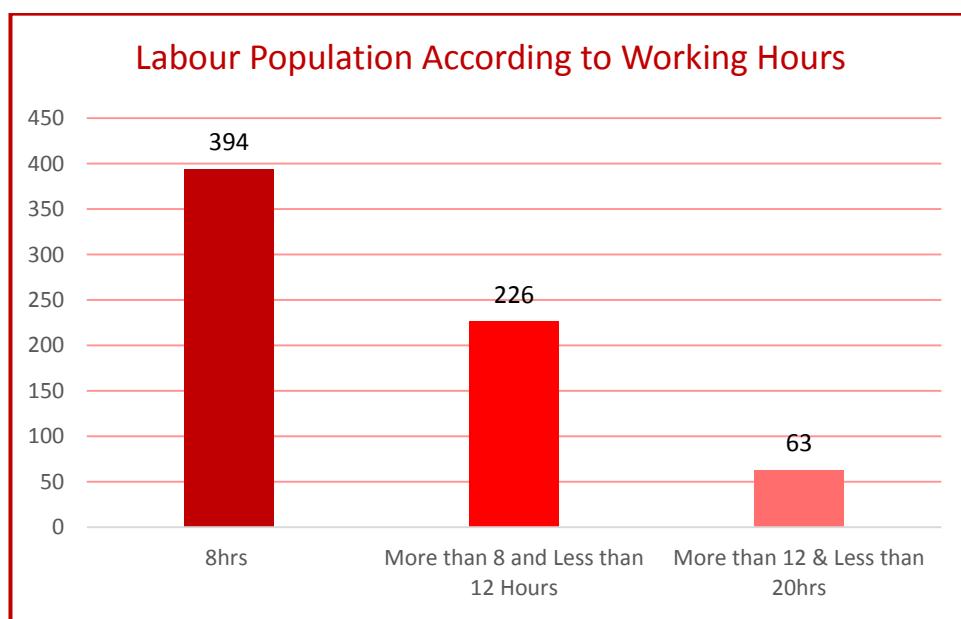
Lockdown. A lot of mothers shared how children were getting addicted to substance abuse during the Lockdown and spending more time over phone during these days.

The fact about the lockdown reinforcing the structural imbalances against women and children in our society is something that one cannot deny and avoid looking at. For all of us who are concentrating our time and resources towards relief work this leaves us with the problem of finding ways in which these structural inequalities can be addressed in a feminist manner in times to come.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The lockdown was a period when vulnerable sections of people had looked up to the State to fulfill their needs – transportation, ration, health etcetera – and which a responsible and ideal State was duty-bound to carry out. The need of the hour was what Upendra Baxi, a legal scholar, had called for in the form of steps to progressively empower the ‘weaker sections’ of society. On the contrary, it was witnessed that the State worked towards systematically corroding every provision meant for uplifting and empowering the weaker sections.

The survey revealed that a significant section of the laboring population was already outside the provisions of the safety net which had been placed for labourers through different legislations and social schemes. It came to the notice of the team that a considerable proportion of labourers, both male and female employed in the informal sector, were already working above the legal bar of an 8-hour shift (around 48% of labourers).



Even after working for hours beyond the ones set by legal-standards, the labourers were yet not able to make ends meet as many of them were working at subsistence levels. This meant that most of them had very little or no savings which they could rely upon during difficult periods such as the one introduced by the Lockdown. The plethora of labour regulations – Industrial Establishment Act 1946, the Industrial Disputes Act 1947, the

Minimum Wages Act 1948, the Factories Act 1948, the Employees State Insurance Act 1948 – have not been properly implemented. Even after pushing the precarities of labourers to the extreme, the State has kept on diluting labour-laws through a pseudo justification of reviving Industrial Activity and increasing the flow of FDI. If one was to take cognizance of challenges that labourers have faced during lockdown, it would not be difficult to guess that hard times for labourers are far from over. Under such circumstances it becomes imperative to raise a demand of not only strengthening the functioning of labour-laws which have been put in place but also for actively forming labour unions which can consolidate a collective voice against such atrocities and enable labourers to secure a more significant position in the society.

As has been noted above the labour force is not a homogenous and realizing this one also needs to recognise that women in present times have been pushed into a zone of intense precarity. They now face a triple-burden of addressing setbacks from their job loss, the increased instances of domestic violence and also take care of their physical and mental well-being in times of COVID. It therefore becomes critical to address these issues at both individual and structural level for uplifting people out of their misery. Some issues on which intervention is required are:

- As was witnessed amidst the turmoil during the Lockdown phase, the lack of access to food has been one of the major reasons why migrant labourers decided to undertake the arduous journey back home. The return journey has also made a serious impact on the savings they had made over the laboring season in their destination states which would make it difficult for them to avail necessary rations once back home. During the Lockdown, several reports have pointed towards increase in food consumption per household and in seeing the prevalence of COVID there has been a push towards foods which can increase an individual's immunity. Taking this into account, it becomes a duty of the State to provide adequate ration per household through the Universal Public Distribution Scheme and attempt to extend its reach to people who do not have ration cards as was done during the initial phase of Lockdown.
- The metropolitan areas have emerged as epicenters of COVID spread since its outbreak and it would be sometime before the migrant labourers consider returning to these cities. Under such circumstances the role of public employment

schemes such as MGNREGS becomes crucial to provide the labourers with employment in their source states. Not just its implementation but a proper functioning in terms of availability of jobs and regular payments would ensure that purchasing power can be increased amongst the vulnerable groups, which can supplement their needs along with what they receive from social schemes.

- With an increase in Corona cases in even the rural parts of the country, it becomes vital to increase the efficiency of the Primary Healthcare Centers and other medical benefits included in the National Health Mission. Till this time, the metropolises have taken active medical steps to make healthcare accessible to people diagnosed with Corona, the same needs to be replicated in the rural areas as well.
- Different reports and studies have also talked about the rise in cases of women and child trafficking as labourers once the Lockdown is lifted and relaxed. Forced cases of marriage and *naata* have started to see a spike. It is the constitutional obligation of the State to protect life and liberty of every individual (Article 21 of the Constitution) and also save them from any kind of exploitation (Article 23 of the Constitution). Thus, ensuring a strict enforcement of women and child protection schemes through the competent authorities is something that the State needs to undertake urgently.
- Women labourers have lost out on their jobs due to the lockdown. In-order to address the adverse impacts of this on economic freedom, that has had a serious repercussion on socio-political position of women in their respective communities, it is required that women led Self Help Groups should be strengthened. Initiating cooperative enterprise would not only put money in the hands of women but also initiate solidarities amongst them and might prevent any form of exploitation that women face in everyday affairs.
- The State should also ensure that children from vulnerable categories are not deprived of their education. The reporting on suicide of a 14-year old Dalit girl from Tamil Nadu should be an eye-opener for the State as well as school authorities to seek out ways through which every child can get access to their school-education. The schools can, for example, assess amongst their students about how many of them can attend classes in an online manner and for whom coming to school is imperative to their access to education.
- While substantial responsibility in fulfilling the demands of people resides with the State, the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSO) is also essential in times that we

face today. The CSOs have played a momentous role in forming labour unions even for sectors that are categorized as informal sectors in the economy. Such a role is key to check any form of exploitation that labourers might face today or in times to come. The CSOs should continue to expand possibilities of organizing the labour force for sectors such as household workers, vegetable vendors, construction workers and so on and so forth. An organized workforce can enable labourers to raise a strong collective demand in appalling circumstances for better wages and living conditions at sites of work.

These are only a limited set of suggestions which need to be expanded according to contextual settings of individuals and different communities and worked upon to address the demands of the population, which has majorly suffered during the Lockdown and find their presence in rural areas of the country. The State sponsored violence through police forces has to stop in future. The State and CSOs need to get together to chart out a roadmap for not just getting the economy back on track but more importantly to make migrant labourers feel ‘human’ again. Decisions and steps taken today can only lead to two outcomes: either the rural areas can become a graveyard of dying aspirations and dignified life or they can become a strong backbone in our struggles to revive ourselves from this pandemic.