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## **SAPNE MERE, BHAVISHYA MERA**

**Assessing the Needs of Women Informal Workers in Gurugram, India to Build a Sustainable Future**

Prepared under the project “Women’s Consortium for and by Women: Reclaiming Space, Voice, Agency”, supported by The Embassy of the Netherlands in India.

## 1.0 Introduction

In 2018, 465 million of India's 512 million-strong labour force were employed. Of that, a very high proportion of the participating labour force (around 92%) works in the informal sector. The workforce comprises less than 25% women, and 94% of these working women are engaged in the informal sector. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown has had an unprecedented impact on the lives of these women informal workers, many of whom are migrants and the sole economic supporters of their families.

A [study with 92 women informal domestic workers during the Covid-19 pandemic in India](#) reveals the socio-economic, health, and gender impact of the lockdown on migrant workers employed in informal work. The stress of job insecurity, health risks, and exposure to sexual harassment, abuse, and violence in the confined spaces of the households which are their workplaces weighs heavy on their lives. They want to envision and live a different future.

Sapne Mere, Bhavishya Mera, an initiative of PRIA in association with Martha Farrell Foundation, aspires to support the social and economic dreams of vulnerable women informal workers who are primarily working as migrant domestic workers, by setting up a Resource and Support Centre in Harijan Basti, an informal urban settlement in the city of Gurugram, Haryana, India. The Resource and Support Centre is envisioned as a safe space for the women and their adolescent girl children, and a common point where all service-related information of government schemes and programs for informal workers can be made available. It is envisaged the Centre will be run by women from the community, trained to run a social enterprise, for women in their community. Aware of various social issues like gender-based violence and sexual harassment that constrain their agency to lead full lives, and capacitated to demand rights and entitlements that are needed to make their dreams come true, these women are attempting to build a resilient, safe and secure future – for themselves and their families.

A Needs Assessment Survey conducted with informal migrant women workers in February 2021 shows us the way forward in setting up such a Resource and Support Centre in Gurugram.

**We asked 146 women migrant workers living in Harijan Basti what kind of Resource and Support Centre they wanted. This is what they told us:**

- The women clearly expressed the need for the Resource and Support Centre to be a **clean, hygienic, safe space**, which they feel comfortable visiting.
- It was very important for them to know the **physical location** of the Resource and Support Centre in order to access the services.
- The Centre needs to act as an **information hub**, providing information about various government schemes, and health related information on adolescent healthcare, child healthcare, pre- and post-natal healthcare, mental health, etc. They also want information related to good but affordable schools where they can send their children to get a decent education.
- The women workers want to **get connected to better employment opportunities** and **learn new skills** like a beautician course, advanced cooking, and business management skills to start their own business.
- Those women who have not attended school want an **adult learning centre** where they can learn the basics of spoken English and Hindi, and to read and write at least till the primary level.

- They want the Resource and Support Centre to **provide legal aid** to support them in filing a sexual harassment complaint and/or a case of domestic violence.
- The Centre can also be a space for collectivizing and forming self-help groups.

## 2.0 Methodology

The Needs Assessment Survey used three community engaged methods to collect data – **transect walk**, **informal discussions** and a **mobile-based survey**. Data was collected through women community animators, who are also residents of the community.

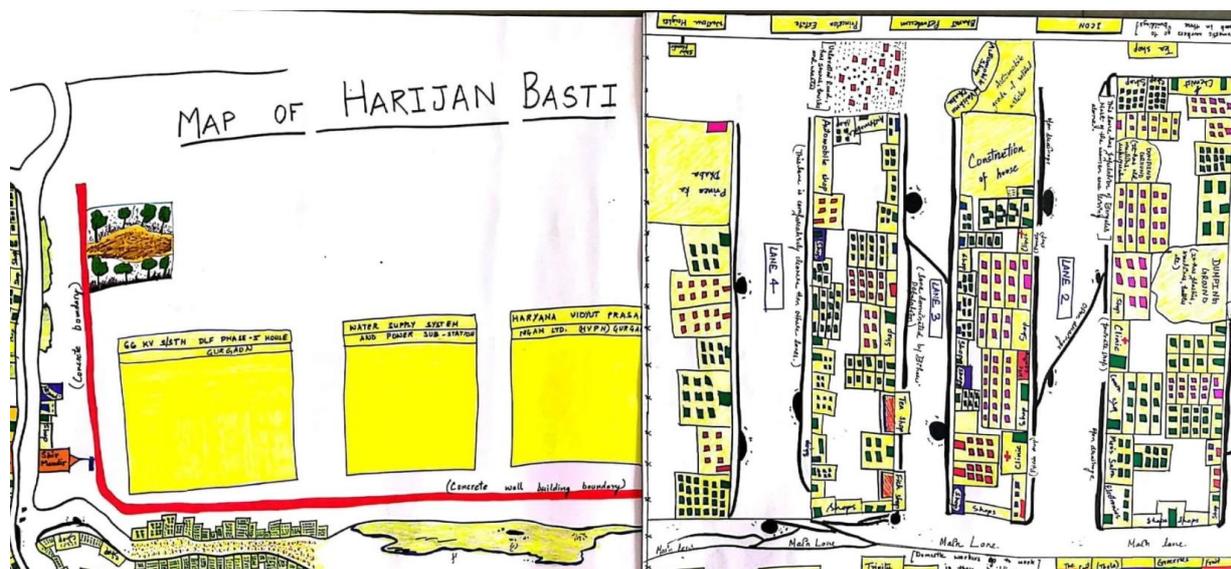
Prior to carrying out the survey, the community animators were trained. The training oriented them about the goals and objectives of the project and the purpose of conducting the survey. The animators learnt how to ask key questions, how to personally interact with the respondents, and use the mobile phone based questionnaire created as a Google form.

### 2.1 Transect Walk

A transect walk is a valuable exercise in Participatory Research, which requires members of the community to walk through different areas of their locality and record specific observations. Initial discussions with the women living in Harijan Basti had revealed that they were not aware of their settlement and their community members. The community animators mobilised women informal workers for the transect walk:

- To know the community holistically
- To map out the various services and resources available in the community
- To get familiar with diverse community members by interacting with them

The women who participated in the transect walk counted the number of buildings, noted where the essential services shops are located, and mapped their houses in different lanes and bylanes. The transect walk resulted in a detailed map of their settlement.



Participatory Map of Harijan Basti co-created with Women Domestic Workers

## 2.2 Informal Discussions

Personal interaction and informal discussions in groups helped women share their lived experiences and challenges of living in Harijan Basti and working as domestic help. Several shared their journey of migration, experiences at their workplaces, how the pandemic had affected their lives, their living conditions, how unsafe they feel, and their fears for their adolescent daughters. Semi-structured questions were useful in facilitating these discussions.

## 2.3 Mobile-Based Survey

The Needs Assessment Survey attempts to primarily understand the women's outlook to alternative job opportunities, skills they want to learn, and what they want from the Resource and Support Centre that the project seeks to establish. The respondents were asked to answer questions about their lives as informal migrant women workers, challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, safety concerns, job insecurities, access to health services, and their future aspirations. The survey questionnaire was co-created along with a few domestic workers after an initial visualising workshop.

## 3.0 Profile of Women Domestic Workers Living in Harijan Basti

**Suchitra (41)**, who hails from West Bengal, has been living in Harijan Basti for the last 20 years. Married at the age of 14. A mother at the age of 16. A widow at 19, when her alcoholic husband died.

She says her life was happier when she was a child. Her father worked in a factory, earning well, so he could afford to educate her. After her father's death, when her uncle became her guardian, she was married off to a very poor family who used to physically abuse her. She heard about job opportunities in Gurgaon (as it was then called) from her neighbours in the village, and she fled her abusive in-laws with her young sons. She was just 21 years old.

Her first job was as a cook and she continues to work as one. After 20 years of experience, she is considered an 'expert' cook. She has made lot of contacts in the community, connecting newcomers to the Basti with employment opportunities as domestic workers in the nearby condominiums.

A single parent, she took care of her sons, but now lives alone as both her sons have abandoned her and gone back to the village. During the lockdown she was not paid for a few months and faced shortages of food and money. She doesn't want to go back to her village ever, and aspires to start a business of her own.

**Salma (32)** is also from West Bengal. She migrated with her husband seven years ago. Her husband works as a security guard and she works as a domestic worker doing *jhadu-pochha* (cleaning, sweeping and mopping) in three houses. She was a housewife when she first came, but the burden and expenses of a life in the city forced her to seek work outside her home. Her pay is far less compared to that of a cook. She reaches her first workplace at 7.00 a.m. and comes back home at 1 p.m. She cooks food for herself and her family, eats, washes clothes, and cleans her own house before setting out again at 4.00 p.m. for the second round of cleaning in the houses where she works.

She lives with her husband and son in one room, which has an attached kitchen but no ventilation. She uses a common toilet. Salma admits her life is tough. She rarely gets to spend time with her son and

help him with his studies. She studied till class 10, but could not continue her education because she was married off. She is keen her son completes his education.

**Shashikala (26)** is from Bihar and is a recent migrant to Harijan Basti, arriving in the community a couple of years ago. A home science graduate, she was unable to find a formal job. Needing to supplement her family's income, she chose to work as a domestic worker. Her neighbours helped her find a job, but after two months her employer dismissed her on the flimsy pretext that "she took too much time to complete her tasks". Shashikala seems resigned to her fate. "*I was celebrated in my village because I am a graduate, but here my degree is of no use,*" she sighs.

The stories of Suchitra, Salma, and Shashikala are repeated among the 146 women who participated in the Needs Assessment Survey. Each story reveals the intersectionality of gender, education (or lack thereof), migration, high cost of living in a city, and availability only of informal work opportunities. These women come from different states of India (Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh), some from across the border (Nepal), and have made their lives in a dynamic inter-cultural milieu, visible in terms of food, language, and clothing styles.

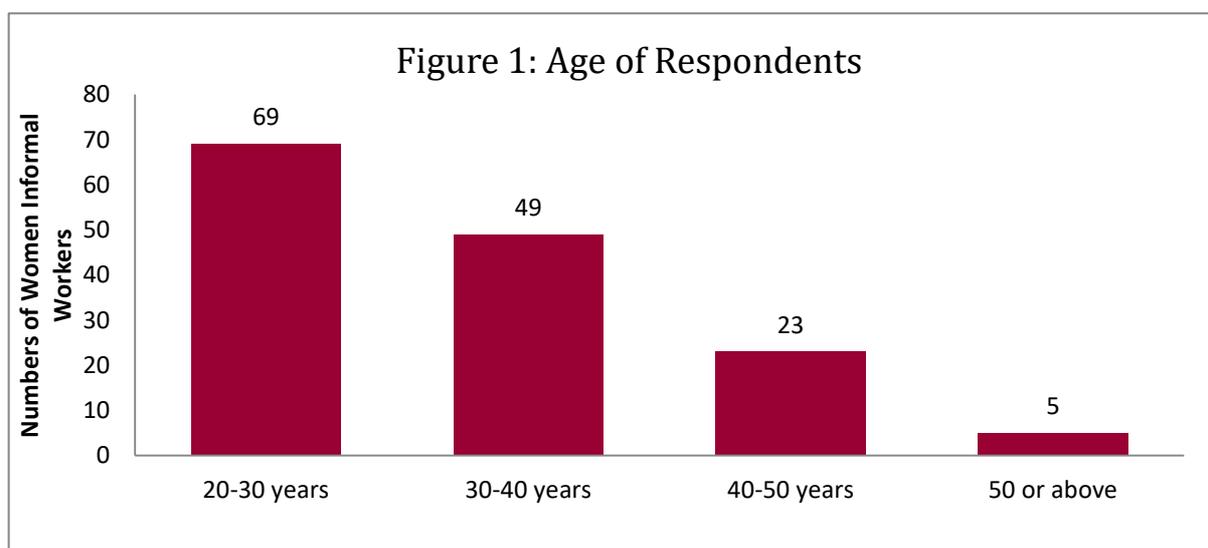
The oldest migrants (in terms of age and length of residence in Harijan Basti) surveyed are from West Bengal and primarily work as cooks. They tend to be more confident in articulating their demands and needs.

Women respondents between the ages of 30 and 40, many of whom have only completed primary education, primarily work as domestic workers and are more in demand because of their experience. Doing the same tasks for several years (often for more than a decade), makes them 'skilled professionals' who can command a higher wage.

Majority of the younger (below 30 years of age) respondents are domestic workers who clean houses, recent migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. They tend to be more educated (secondary and intermediate), but with less expertise in domestic work, their income is lower.

### 3.1 Age Profile

Nearly half (47%) of the women informal workers surveyed are young (less than 30 years of age) and a third (34%) are between 30 to 40 years of age.



### 3.2 Cultural Identity

The women primarily follow two religions – Hinduism and Islam – and have migrated from West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Nepal. Majority of them are Bengali-speaking.

Figure 2: Religious Affiliation of Respondents

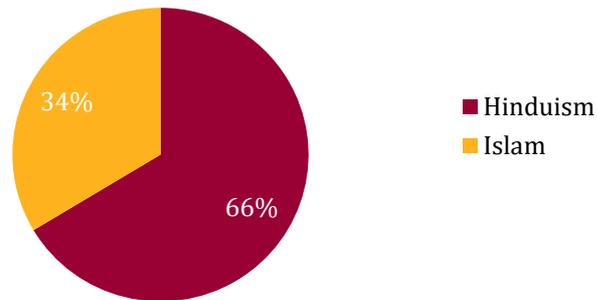
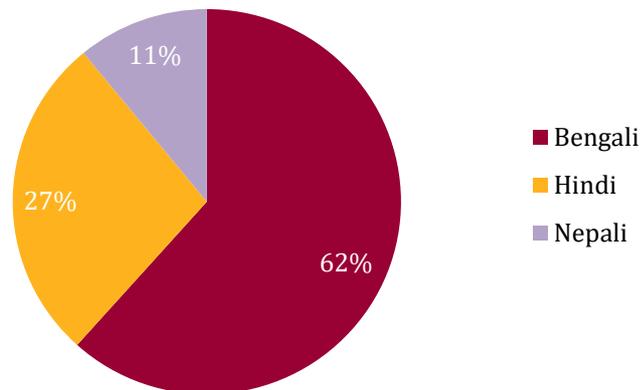


Figure 3: Languages Spoken by Respondents



### 3.3 Educational Qualifications

Nearly half of the women who participated in the survey have attended school. They tend to be below 40 years of age. More than half (58%) dropped out after primary school, and 28% dropped out after middle school (Class 8). Less than 10% have passed high school, and only 2% of the respondents are graduates.

When asked why they did not get to complete their education, they uniformly attributed it to societal attitudes of not educating the girl child (with preferential treatment for the boy child), the burden of performing household duties and looking after younger siblings falling on them, and some being married off as child brides.

Figure 4: Percentage of Respondents who have gone to School

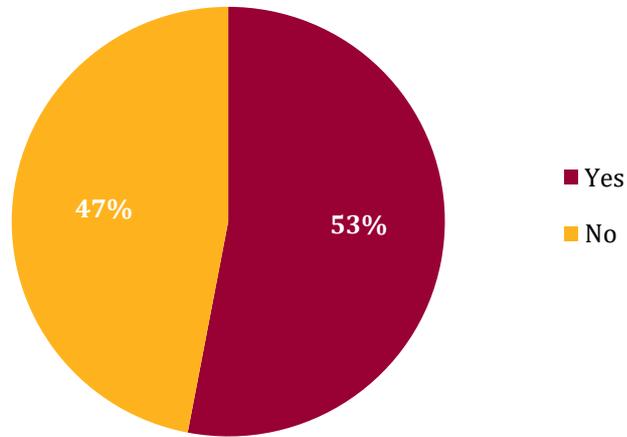
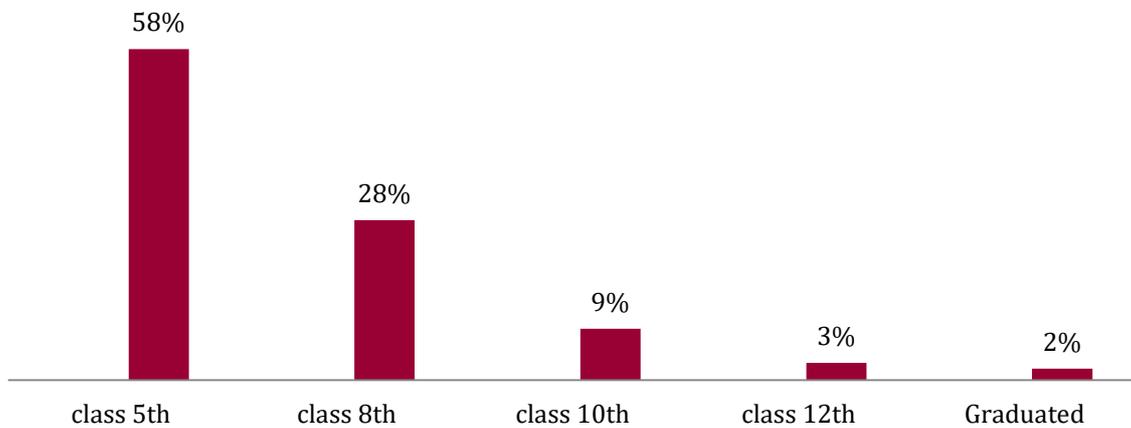


Figure 5: Level of Education of Respondents



### *3.4 Marriage and Children*

Majority (97%) of the migrant women workers are married but not all of them live with their husbands. Some are widows, and there are many who have been abandoned by their husbands and are now single mothers.

Out of 142 married women, 116 women (over 80%) have children, and those who do not have children are either pregnant with their first child or are newly-wed. Majority (65 women) have three or four children. Some are expecting their fifth or sixth child.

Figure 6: Family Members per Household

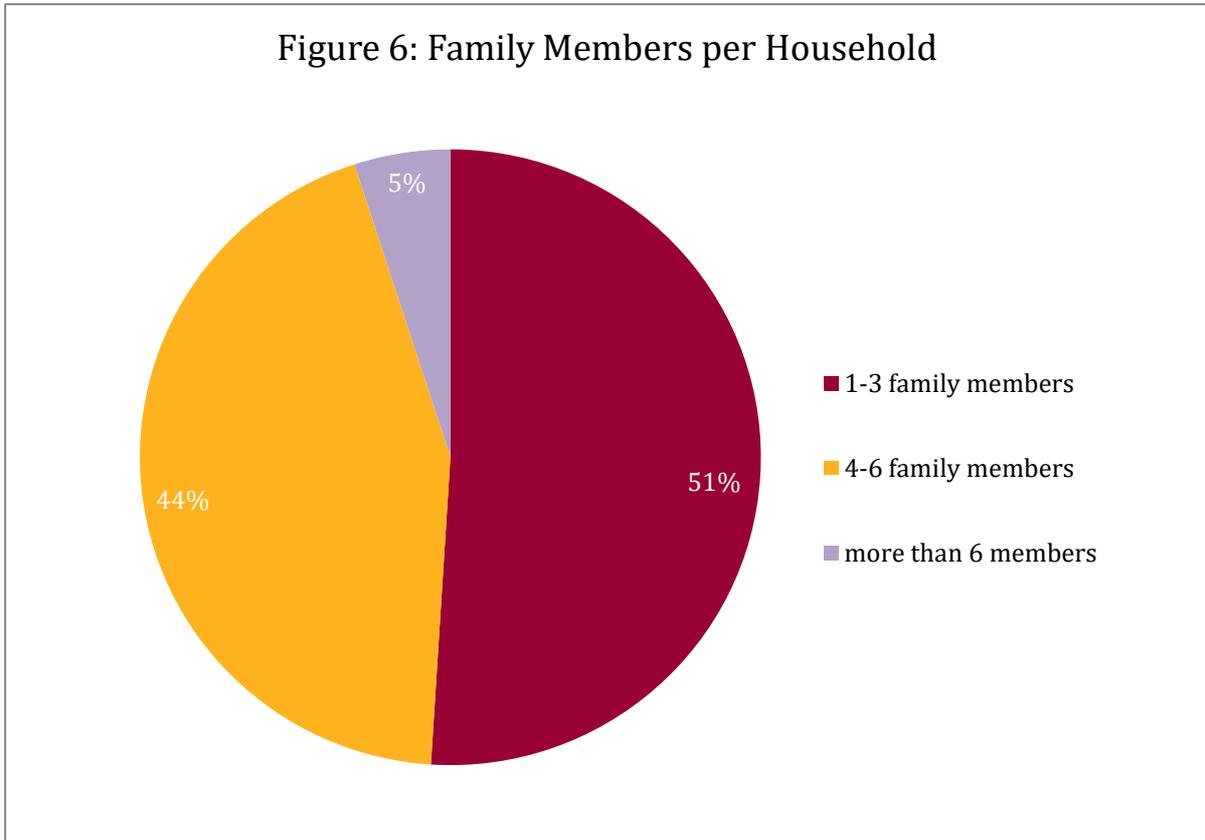
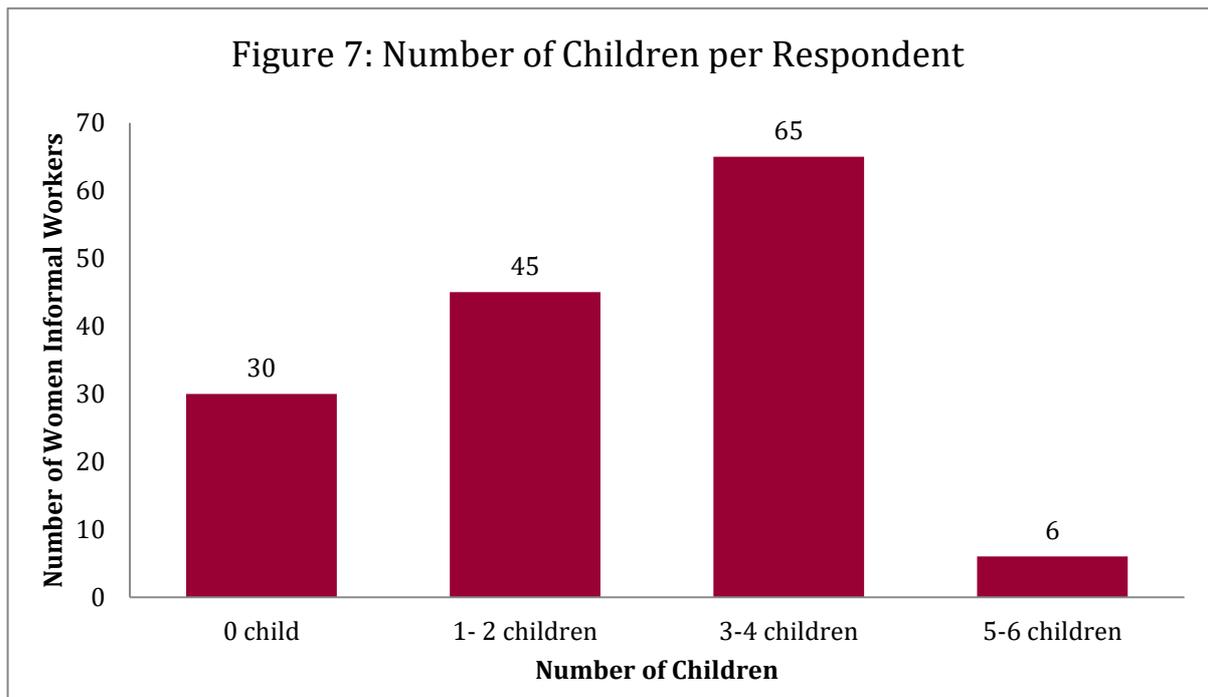


Figure 7: Number of Children per Respondent



### 3.5 Housing Conditions

The women informal workers live in inadequate housing and lack access to basic services and health facilities.

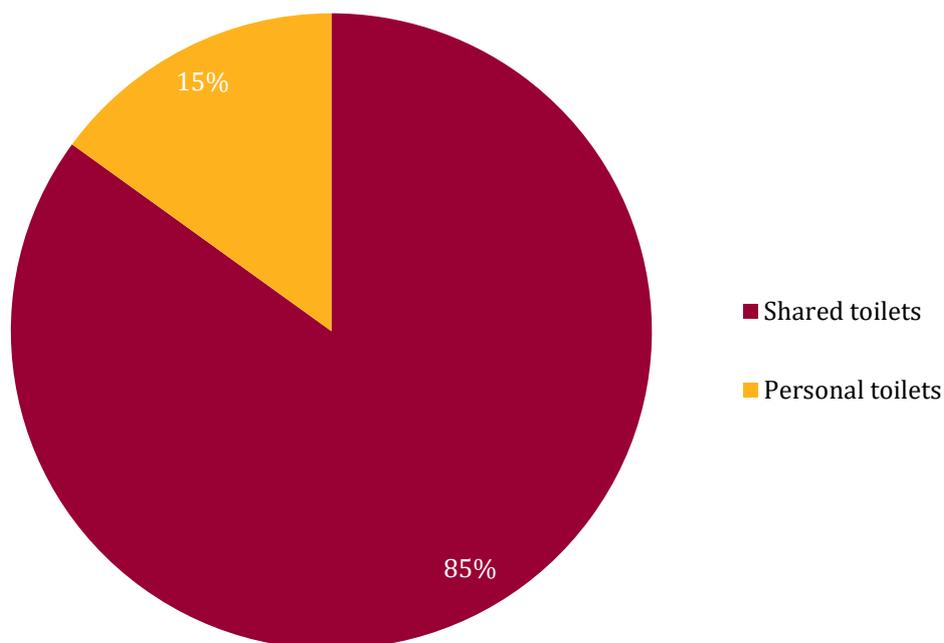
The transect walk highlighted the deplorable health and hygiene conditions of the *basti*. There is no proper drainage system; open sewage and garbage piles are breeding grounds for diseases. In the informal discussions, the women expressed concern for the health of their children because of the lack of proper sanitation facilities.

Nearly half of the women live in one-room accommodation (with an attached kitchen) with 1 to 3 other family members. An almost equal number (44%) live in one-room accommodation with 4 to 6 other family members. The rooms lack proper ventilation and are cramped with no open spaces like balconies.

*“I usually take a bath in the afternoon when everybody is either asleep and men are at work. The bathroom on my floor has no door; I have to bathe behind a curtain. The men living on my floor bathe inappropriately, scratching their body parts, which makes me very uncomfortable.”* – **Baby Banu**

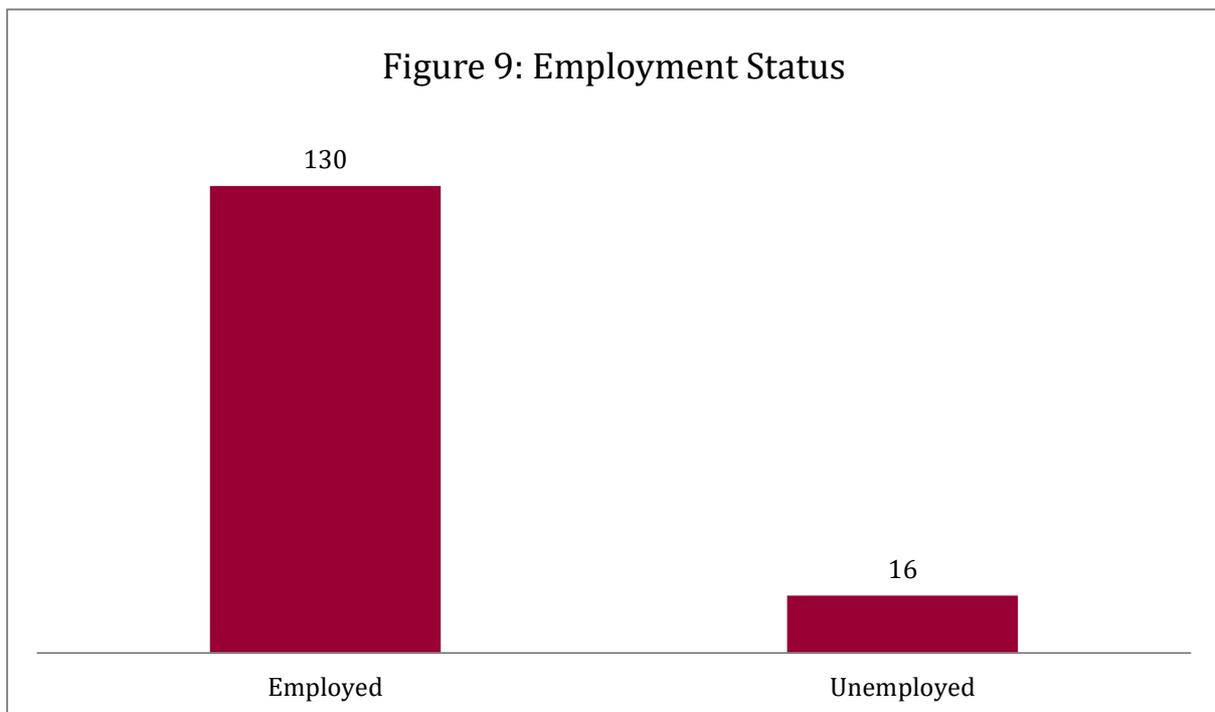
Majority (85%) of the women share toilets. One toilet is often used by 10 families living on a particular floor. The women shared that they don't have any privacy when using the bathrooms and how scared and unsafe they feel when they have to use it at night. As a result, many of these women and their adolescent daughters avoid using the toilet at night.

Figure 8: Type of Toilet Used by Respondents



### 3.6 Employment and Skills

Nearly 90% of these women are employed, with most of them (80%) employed as domestic workers. The remaining are self-employed – a couple of them run a vegetable shop, one of them is a tailor, stitching blouses and altering clothes at home, and another irons clothes to earn a living. Three women run their own business – a tea and snack shop, a shop selling spices, and a shop selling clothes and cosmetics.

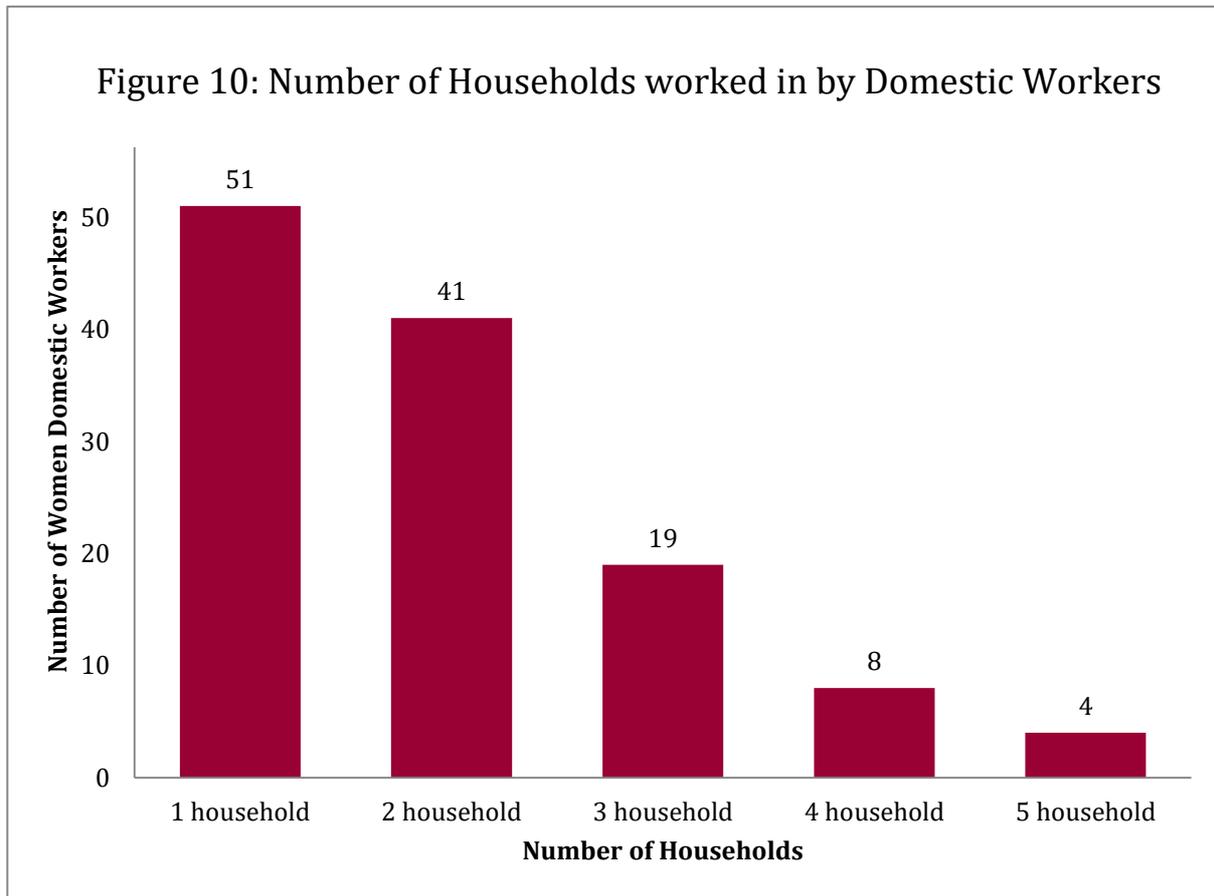


There is a range of work done by the domestic workers. Many are employed as cooks, while others mop, sweep, and dust houses, as well as clean utensils and clothes. They work as full-time domestic help (that is, they work for 12 hours in one household) and as part-time help (doing the same task in one or several houses), working for a minimum of 2 hours and maximum of 6 hours in each house.

#### **Types of Tasks Performed by Women Domestic Workers**

- *31 women domestic workers are cooks. They have practical knowledge of making dishes from various cuisines (Indian, Chinese, Continental, and Mughlai).*
- *53 women domestic workers work as cleaners (sweeping and dusting).*
- *32 women domestic workers cook and clean for the households where they work.*
- *7 domestic workers only wash the utensils in the houses where they are employed.*

The survey was undertaken in February 2021, which was eight months after the lockdown restrictions had eased and Gurugram had returned to ‘pre-lockdown normality’. But the employment status of these domestic workers had not yet returned to ‘normal’. Most of them had part-time jobs only in one household. This was not by choice but rather a repercussion of losing the jobs which they had before the lockdown was imposed. Several employers did not hire them back after the lockdown eased. **Ramwati** shared in one of the discussions, “*Our madams used to rely on us for work. It was hard to find any free domestic worker. But now, many of us are unemployed.*”



### 3.7 Income

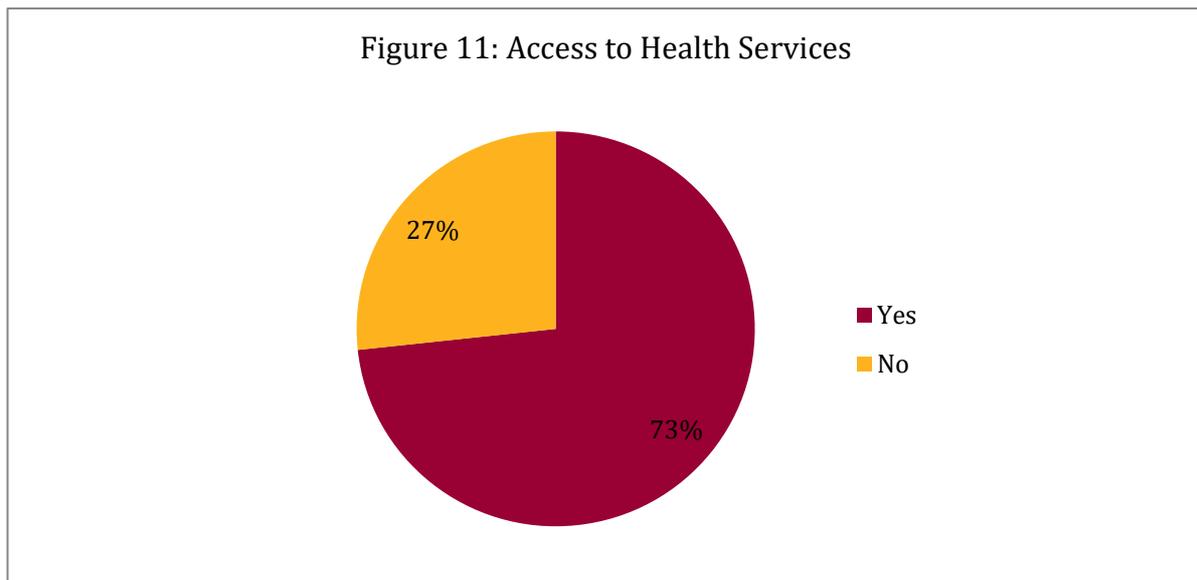
During personal interactions and group discussions, the women domestic workers shared that, after the lockdown, the wage rates have fallen because now there are more women available to work in the limited number of households willing to hire them. They unwillingly accept whatever is offered as a salary because if they try to negotiate then there is the possibility of losing the available opportunity.

Minimum income from part-time work in one household is between ₹2000 and ₹3000. If they are employed full-time (working for 12 hours in one household), then they are paid between ₹7000 and ₹8000.

**Meera**, who works as a masseuse, said, “*I used to charge ₹1000 per hour for full body massage, but now I charge only ₹250. If I raise the price, nobody will call me. I am not recognised as a professional because I have not done a course and don’t carry essential oils and towels. So, I can’t charge as much as the professional masseuse, who makes good money.*”

### 3.8 Awareness of Health and Safety

Health is a major concern for all the women. They lack access to public health facilities and have no knowledge of any government health schemes (like Ayushman Bharat, a national health insurance scheme). There are seven or eight private clinics in Harijan Basti, whose services are questionable. Several respondents complained that the only treatment they get in these clinics for any health problem is a glucose drip, and they are charged a high fee for this.



Majority of the women workers (93%) have no knowledge of helpline numbers they can call in case of a health emergency. Some of them were hearing about this concept for the first time. Similarly, there is a large percentage of women (79%) who do not know where to file a complaint of domestic violence. The majority of them (91%) do not know where or how to file a complaint in case they have been sexually harassed in their workplace(s).

Several of the women who live alone in the *basti* shared stories of how highly unsafe they feel. Women spoke about alcoholic men who misbehave with them when they come to buy things at the shops they run. *“Drunken men touch me inappropriately when they come to my store. When I push them back, they abuse me. I don’t know how to stop them,”* said **Basanti**, who owns a tea stall. Basanti, and several women like her, are unaware of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act, 2013 and that they have the right to file a case with the police under the Act because their tea stalls or shops are their workplace.

## 4.0 Impact of the Pandemic

During the Needs Assessment Survey, the participants were asked about their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown which was imposed in the months of April to June 2020. The responses clearly highlight that majority of them (90.4%) faced several challenges – no money because they suddenly became unemployed, not having enough to eat because they could not buy rations, and discrimination and humiliation when they returned to work because the middle-class

households who are their employers believed that they would “bring Corona into our homes”. The women were also not able to access basic healthcare during the lockdown.

Losing their jobs was the most significant difficulty women domestic workers faced, with 60.1% confirming that they were let go of by their employers as soon as the first lockdown was announced. Mental stress had led at least one domestic worker to commit suicide.

*“I always believe in hope but after this lockdown, things have become very difficult. We are left with two options – to stay here or go back to our villages. No place can guarantee employment, but the chances of getting a job are higher if we stay.”* – **Sharmila**

Although several have now found some form of paid work, 72% of the respondents, when asked, confirmed they are looking for new or alternative employment options because they are dissatisfied with the wages they are currently being paid. Pre-lockdown, they used to work in more than one household, and they could earn enough to send their children to school and cook nutritious food for their families. **Sumitra** said, *“Private school fees are very high, we cannot afford it. We want our children to be educated but it’s like a dream now.”*

## 5.0 Needs of Women Informal Workers

*“As domestic workers we rely on our employers. But, this should not be the case. We must be self-sufficient to some extent so that we do not die of hunger during another crisis like this one.”* – **Manju**, domestic worker living in Harijan Basti for 11 years

Faced with uncertain incomes and limited job opportunities, lacking education, and feeling unsafe, what do these women need to build back better?

Enhanced skills, access to information and choices for alternative economic opportunities – these are the primary needs of the women informal workers we surveyed in Harijan Basti.

### 5.1 Learning New Skills

What skills do they want to learn so that they are better prepared to meet the challenges of uncertainty like the Pandemic? The women showed interest in learning several skills – multi-cuisine cooking, business management, beautician work, and stitching and tailoring.

For them, learning new skills is not merely to earn a better income. They believe they will be treated more respectfully, especially back in their home villages, if they are trained and certified in these new skills.

- Learn to cook new dishes like Continental cuisine, varieties of pasta sauces, and Chinese cuisine.
- Many women have talent in knitting and embroidery. They want to develop these as professional skills.
- Many women want to run their own business like selling dry packaged food (pickles, snacks, etc.).
- Learn skills like threading, hair cutting, and facials, to open a beauty parlour and earn a sustainable living back home.

### 5.2 Access to Information

The women clearly communicated the need for information related to health (various government schemes, adolescent healthcare, child healthcare, and pre- and post-natal healthcare) and safety, for themselves and their adolescent daughters.

*“I have three girls and I am expecting another child, hopefully a boy. I need to know about good diet and precautions during pregnancy.” – Rita*

They also want access to legal information and advice, and information regarding employment opportunities.

### 5.3 Alternative Choices

*“I am getting old and day by day it is becoming harder to go for work. There is no one to look after me. I want to start my own cosmetics shop in the community but I have no knowledge how to do this.” – Suchitra*

Many women want to start their own business but they are not aware about how to set up and run one. They want to learn business management skills.

The women expressed the need to form a group, so that they can collectively support each other to learn, articulating the need for a physical space which is clean, hygienic, comfortable, and safe. Some women said that they want a space in which they can escape from reality, a recreational space where they can express themselves freely and enjoy each other’s company, even if only for a short while.

## 6.0 A Centre that Supports a Sustainable Alternative Future

Can a Resource and Support Centre (*Sahayta Kendra*) help them in meeting these needs? What kind of services can this Centre provide?

There was agreement on the concept of a Resource and Support Centre, one which fulfills women informal workers’ different needs and provides a variety of functions.

For most women, the Centre needs to provide vocational or skill-development courses and function as an information hub. Sumitra, and many like her, want the Resource and Support Centre to help them with information about good but inexpensive schools for their children. Others want information on government schemes, help in completing applications for identity cards (Aadhaar card) and ration cards. Women expect the Centre to provide information that enables their financial inclusion, such as helping them open bank accounts.

Domestic workers spoke of the Centre as a ‘bridge’ connecting them to each other and to households which need domestic help.

All women want the Centre to provide healthcare information. They see it as a safe space where adolescent girls can also come and learn about nutrition and health.

*“My daughter is 13 years old and she goes to an English medium school. She just started menstruating. Her body is also changing. I want to talk to her but I don’t know how to initiate the conversation. Will the Centre teach me this?” – China*

Some women talked about adult literacy services at the Centre. Several had dropped out from school at an early age, and with nearly half the respondents never having gone to school, they want educational assistance from the Resource and Support Centre.

*“I want the Resource and Support Centre to be a place where I and many like me can come and learn how to read and write. I am very great in communication but I feel less confident when I tell people that I can’t read or write. I don’t want this to be my weakness for the rest of my life.”* – **Bharti**

The women are envisioning the Resource and Support Centre as a physical space in the community which is accessible to all women from the community. They want it to be inclusive and non-discriminatory, where women can come and interact with each other. It can also become a space for collectivising.

*“I am hoping that the Centre will be a discrimination free space where everybody will listen to each other.”* – **Mahima**

In the ultimate analysis, the women expressed the need for the Centre to be a place “for the women and by the women”, which can only be created through collective effort.

*“I am very excited about the Centre. I think we all will enjoy ourselves there.”* – **Yasodha**

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