Women for Women:

Redefining Relief for and by Women Domestic Workers in the Second Wave



A COVID-19 RELIEF INITIATIVE WITH AND BY WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN DELHI AND HARYANA





Introduction

India has over 4 million domestic workers, according to government data. This workforce, a considerable number of whom are migrants and a majority of whom are women, are an extremely vulnerable community of workers, because as informal workers, they are not able to access many of the basic rights guaranteed under India's Labour Codes. Despite being included in benefits such as insurance cover, old age benefits, maternity benefits, among other things, domestic workers are not formally registered under any institution. Without formal recognition, their access to any of the benefits availed of by informal workers in India are impeded. The precarious work conditions create conditions of economic duress among domestic workers, making them very vulnerable to issues of violence - in their homes, in the public sphere, as well as in the workplace. They face harassment and sexual harassment in the hands of employers, security guards, landlords and within their families, exacerbated by the burden of being breadwinners for their children.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, this group of informal workers was amongst the worst affected. When the pandemic began, the Martha Farrell Foundation and PRIA had already been collectivising domestic workers across Delhi NCR into an action network for the implementation of sexual harassment at workplace redressal mechanisms at district levels. Our co-published anthology of accounts by women domestic workers during the first wave in 2020 revealed women domestic workers in Gurgaon were struggling with several challenges, including lack of space for physical distancing, loss of jobs and income, increasing risk of violence in their homes, inability to pay rent, severe emotional duress. Most of them received little to no support from their employers.

They were slowly recovering from the impacts of the first wave, when the second wave struck. At the onset of the second wave, there was a culture of silence and great fear among women domestic workers.

In an early meeting of the Network for the Rights and Voices of Domestic Workers in Delhi-NCR, a coalition of seventeen organisations, including trade unions, civil society organisations and nonprofits, of which the Martha Farrell Foundation is a founding member, the Foundation became aware of the insidious nature of challenges mounting in the lives of women domestic workers in the region, through a participatory exchange of information and experiences from shared by member organisations.



Martha Farrell Foundation and Participatory Research in Asia



Further conversations with representatives of 15,000+ women domestic workers in Delhi-NCR, the total outreach of the Network for the Rights and Voices of Domestic Workers, revealed the following key challenges:

- Without formal recognition, domestic workers were deprived of access to any social protection, including government welfare programmes and COVID-19 support
- Majority of women domestic workers in the networks did not have ration cards, lacked Jan Dhan accounts or BPL cards
- Ration shops in their communities were shutting in the lockdown conditions, and the resources to purchase full rations were quickly depleting with the loss of their jobs and incomes
- Employers demanded that their domestic workers get tested to continue working. The fear of testing positive and losing the little income they had created a fear of getting medical help among women domestic workers, even those who were presenting with symptoms of COVID-19. Most of them denied that they had any symptoms at all.
- Those who agreed to get tested found that government facilities were too far from their homes and private facilities too expensive
- Employers in Delhi and Gurgaon began pressurising domestic workers to work full time to avoid the travel back and forth from their homes to the communities they lived in. Many were being asked to take care of unwell members of the family in the homes they worked in, despite the risk.
- Called COVID Carriers in the first wave, domestic workers in the second wave began to be identified and discriminated against as 'COVID Super Spreaders', causing fear, anxiety and humiliation
- The challenges were extracting a heavy toll on domestic workers' mental and physical health.

Martha Farrell Foundation and Participatory Research in Asia

As a response to these challenges shared by women domestic workers, Martha Farrell Foundation and PRIA initiated a COVID-19 Relief Kit Drive for Women Domestic Workers in Delhi-NCR in consultation with, and by domestic workers. The relief drive aimed to reach 3500 women domestic workers and their families, with relief in the form of dry ration, medical and sanitary supplies that would sustain them for a period of three months.

As the journey took shape over May, June and July of 2021, the impact was achieved at a much larger scale, and what was initially conceptualised as 'relief work' took on a much bigger, and more impactful shape, redefining the way we think about relief and support in times of crisis.



Impact

Number of kits distributed to domestic workers: 5,936

Locations:



District-Wise List

Delhi

North: **86** North West: **207** North East: **126**

West: **288**

South West: **268**South: **1094**New Delhi: **588**South East: **722**

East: **773** Shahdara: **37**

Haryana

Gurgaon: **929**Faridabad: **441**Sonepat: **223**Panipat: **154**

COVID Relief Kits Contained:

Dry ration: 15 kg rice, 10 kg flour, 1 kg dal, 1 kg porridge, 2 kg sugar, 1 litre oil, 250 g tea, 100 gms each of turmeric, coriander and chilli powder, 250 g soybean, 1 kg salt

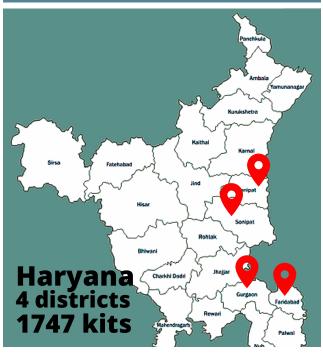
Medical and sanitary: 2 packets of sanitary napkins, 8 masks stitched and purchased from domestic workers themselves, 4 bars of soaps for bathing, 2 dishwasher soaps and 2 soaps for washing clothes, ORS, broad spectrum multi vitamins

Information: Solidarity note with MFF helpline number, COVID care instructions, helpline numbers run by Government and Civil Society including those for violence

Extra:

For children below 5 years: milk, horse gram powder, juice powder, biscuits

For pregnant women: Iron tablets





"To me, this COVID-19 Relief Kit Distribution Drive for Domestic Workers wasn't just about ration distribution. It was an experience that reinforced my confidence in the fact that I am capable of doing such work. I was able to speak to and connect with hundreds of people through it."

- Anjali, Volunteer, New Seemapuri

Key Achievements

Redefining Relief:

The impact and numbers are only one half of the story of relief distribution with and by women domestic workers in the second wave. In addition to distribution and tracking, the entire relief process set several precedents because of the unique methodology that was adopted. The initiative began with relief distribution as the chief objective, but the strategies continuously evolved through the process. One reason is that the adoption of participatory methodologies, in which women domestic workers themselves were active contributors to informing and evolving the strategies for outreach. Consequently, donation processes grew into a movement, going beyond the general categories of identifying, distributing and tracking. The relief process gave way to creating a resilient network of women who banded together to make room for advocacy initiatives, employment opportunities, and crucial data collection of a community that is barely represented in numbers.



Chaya, a domestic worker champion, puts together each COVID Kit for distribution

An initiative by women, for women, with and to women domestic workers

The initiative was entirely led by a team of women, be it in planning and organisation, needs identification, packaging and distribution, or communications. participatory In line with the initiative methodologies, wasn't directed at women domestic workers, rather with women domestic workers, who were active partners in each step of the process. Here's how it all unfolded:

Step one: Initial Lists Prepared

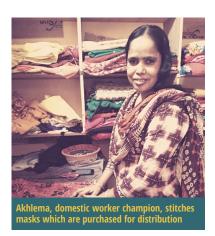
Domestic worker champions put together an initial list of women in need in their communities, an immense contribution at a time when entry of outsiders was barred in the communities.

Step Two: Need Verification

The MFF COVID-19 Relief Team of staff, volunteers and interns made calls and spoke to each woman on the list to understand challenges, share COVID related information and offer psychosocial support, as required. A team of doctors offering free tele consultations were always available for medical support.

Step Three: Preparation of COVID-19 Relief Kits

Based on the need verification, a team of women domestic workers prepared COVID Relief Kits, customised to each family's needs, and put together with care and solidarity. Pregnant women were given iron tablets, children were given treats donated by partners.





Step Four: Dispatch and Feedback

Domestic worker champions onthe-ground then oversaw the distribution, ensuring every person on the list received their Relief Kit. After that, the Relief Team made calls to members of the community to take feedback on the distributed provisions and to understand if there was any further support required.

Women worked together at every stage. Calls weren't one-time or one-way. The Relief Team received calls from the women domestic workers they spoke to, as well, asking about their health and wellbeing. Throughout, women held one another up and in sharing stories and holding sometimes hours-long midnight telephone conversations, they emerged together, stronger in a time of crisis.

Data Collection:

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been no study or data collection done specific to the experiences, needs and rights of domestic workers, despite their large numbers and marginalised conditions in the Indian context. Women domestic workers, MFF and PRIA in the second wave helped bridge this conspicuous data gap in Delhi and Haryana. Every phone call made to women domestic workers was treated as an opportunity for data collection, both numeric and narrative-based.

10+ personal narratives of women domestic workers were collected to explore the layered nature of challenges that the women were facing. Additionally, a survey of 4463 women domestic workers sought to derive information about the economic impacts of the pandemic on their lives including employment and salary status, debt cycles, affordability of rations, and living costs; impacts on their children's education; food security; social security; health and hygiene; COVID-19 and other physical health issues; mental and emotional health status. A detailed report on the findings and analysis of this study are in progress. Below are the highlights:

Economic Impact

- Only 1039 out of 4463 domestic workers were employed during the second wave
 - Of these 1039, 671 domestic workers were working in only one house and 210 in 2-3 houses, most of them working at deducted salaries with no powers of negotiation
- Only 1039 domestic workers drew a full salary in the month of April 2021
 - 1565 did not get any salary in the month of April
 - 715 got only 15 days' worth of pay in April
- Only 635 of 4463 women and their families lived in their own houses
 - 2668 families were living on rent, which added to their expenses
 - 1160 lived in *jhuggi bastis* in deplorable conditions

"We have been living at the mercy of the landlords. If he tells me to pay Rs 5000 for rent, I will have to pay it. Where else will I go? I am lucky to at least have a roof over my head. even if we don't have enough to eat in the day, rent is a priority," - a domestic worker from New Ashok Nagar, Delhi

Children's Education

- Out of 1870 children among the 4463 families, only 315 children were able to take online classes on their smart phones during the pandemic
 - 1555 children were forced to discontinue their education

"We were forced to withdraw our child from school, as we weren't able to afford the fee of Rs. 4000 in the private school. And government schools are shut currently, so he will have to wait until we can enroll him in one" - a domestic worker from Chakkarpur, Gurgaon

COVID-19 Resources: Access and Awareness

- Out of 4463 women domestic workers, only 703 were vaccinated, as of June 2021
 567 of the 703 had only received the first dose
- 1008 domestic workers had not got their COVID-19 tests done

"Test ke Rs. 800 se khaana kha lenge," - a domestic worker from Harijan Basti, Gurgaon

Social Security

- Jan Dhan Account: Out of 4463 domestic workers, only 629 have their own Jan Dhan account
- **Widow Pension:** Of a total of 3400 women surveyed, there were 191 single women and 171 widowed women. Only 65 out of the 171 receive proper widow pension. 10 women had applied for it, but hadn't received anything as of June 2021.
- **Ayushman Bharat Scheme:** Out of 2135 women domestic workers surveyed, only 71 availed the benefits of the Ayushman Bharat Scheme, as of June 2021
- **Ration Card:** Out of 2135 households surveyed, 1618 had ration cards with addresses different from their residential addresses. Only 884 families had ration cards that they could use in their city of residence, while 333 families did not have ration cards



Success Story: Helping a Pregnant Woman Domestic Worker with Medical Support

A pregnant woman domestic worker and her husband, both rendered unemployed during the second wave, were forced to stop visiting the private hospital for their pregnancy consultations. Given it was a complicated pregnancy, they requested help from the COVID-19 Relief Team at MFF for help in identifying an affordable alternative. Through coordinated efforts of the COVID-19 Relief Team and with help from the Chief Minister's Goog Governance Associate - Gurgaon, the couple was able to find a doctor in a government hospital, who not only assuaged their anxieties, but also helped them find a bed and delivered their child in July 2021!

Health and Hygiene

- Out of 2135 women surveyed, 555 lived in houses with their own toilets and proper running water
 - 1086 women and their families used community toilets, of which 5 families were charged Rs. 2 for each use
 - 94 women said their families defecate in open fields or jungles, as they lacked access to toilets

"My daughters and I don't go to the washroom at night as the community toilets in our area closes at 10 pm. We can't go out, either, as it's too unsafe, even if there's an emergency," a domestic worker from Taimoor Nagar, Delhi

From Domestic Workers to Domestic Worker Champions

The COVID-19 Relief Kit Distribution Drive was also an opportunity for women domestic workers in Delhi and Gurgaon to take up leadership roles and find opportunities to help their counterparts through the crisis situation.

Where Sarita, Anima, Meera, Basanti, China, Mamta and Rojina helped with distribution coordination, right from preparing lists to verifying needs to ensuring families received their ration kits; Saroj, Monica, Anu and Chaya were employed under the Relief Drive program to package kits for distribution; meanwhile, Akhalema and Sandhya used their skills to sew and sell cloth masks to the distribution team, which were packed into every kit.



Protection Officers Lend Support

The relief distribution among domestic worker communities in Sonepat and Panipat had an additional element to create more awareness: Ms. Bhanu Gaur, Protection Officer of Sonepat and Ms. Rajni Gupta, Protection Officer of Panipat joined the relief distribution efforts in their respective districts. During distribution, they addressed the women and shared important information on recourses available to them in the case of gender-based violence, which was on the rise across communities, as lockdowns forced women into enclosed spaces with their abusers.



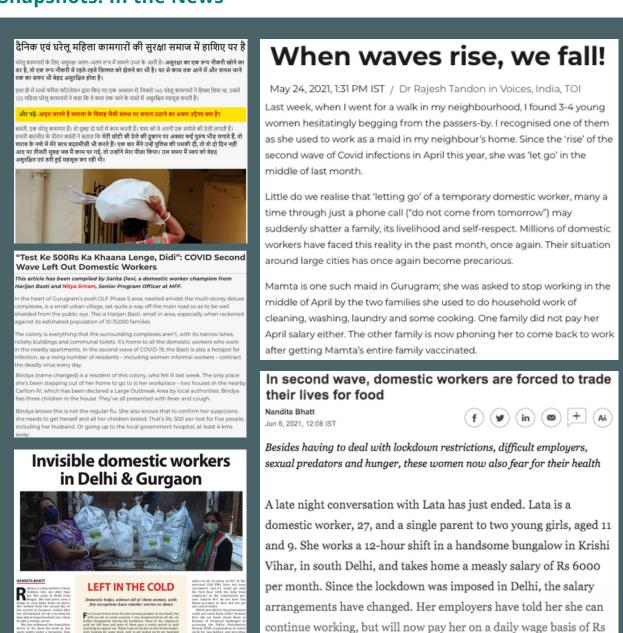


Advocacy

The COVID-19 Relief Kit Distribution Drive also gave ongoing advocacy efforts around the rights of women domestic workers led by women domestic workers, MFF, PRIA and the Network for the Rights and Voices of Domestic Workers, Delhi-NCR, a boost. Using the data collected through the conversations with women domestic workers, traditional and social media were leveraged to:

- Create awareness about the challenges faced by women domestic workers in the pandemic
- Demand sustainable solutions to protect the rights of domestic workers

Snapshots: In the News



150 per day for the days that she comes to work.



Highlights:

- Raageshwari Loomba Swaroop, an Indian singer, actress, television personality, mindfulness speaker, endorsed the fundraiser, and amplified the issue by using her social media presence to take forward the conversation around the rights and voices of women domestic workers.
- On International Domestic Workers' Day (June 16), Domestic Worker Champion Monica helped co-create the Martha Farrell Foundation's first ever Instagram Reel, leveraging the platform and format to create conversations around the issue of domestic workers' rights. The Reel was viewed more than 5000 times and shared more than 100 times.
- In early July, Breakthrough India and Martha Farrell Foundation collaborated to cohost a Webinar with Nandita Bhatt (Director - MFF), Anita Kapoor (General Secretary of Sheheri Mahila Kamgar Union) and Anchita Ghatak (Founder - Parichiti) in conversation about the way forward to ensure women domestic workers' rights. The conversation was broadcast Live on Facebook and viewed more nearly 600 times.

Links to Published Work during the Second Wave:

- <u>दैनिक एवं घरेलू महिला कामगारों की सुरक्षा समाज में हाशिए पर है</u> by Samiksha Jha
- <u>Post-Second Wave, Domestic Workers At Higher Risk Of Sexual Harassment At Work Than Ever</u> by Nitya Sriram
- <u>"Why Them, Why Not Us": A Curious Case Of Missing Empathy In The Second Wave</u> by Nandita Bhatt
- <u>"Test Ke 500Rs Ka Khaana Lenge, Didi": COVID Second Wave Left Out Domestic Workers</u> by Sarita Devi and Nitya Sriram
- <u>In second wave, domestic workers are forced to trade their lives</u> <u>for food</u> by Nandita Bhatt
- The 'invisible' domestic workers in Delhi & Gurgaon left in the lurch by employers
- <u>कोविड कॉल में घरेलू कामगारों की व्यथा-कथा की कहाँ सुनवाई!</u> by Samiksha Jha
- When Waves Rise, We Fall! by Dr. Rajesh Tandon
- <u>कोरोना से नहीं, लॉकडाउन से डर लगता है</u> by Samiksha Jha
- <u>Don't neglect the domestic worker</u> by Shruti Batra, Nandita Bhatt and Nitya Sriram

Narratives from Domestic Worker Narratives:

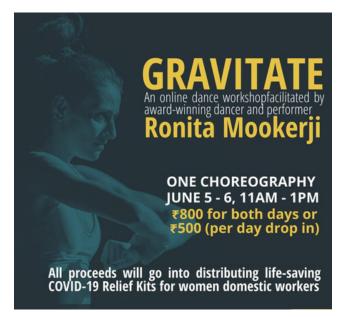
- <u>Living with HIV, I am not even sure if I am eligible for the COVID-19</u> vaccination
- <u>I tested positive because my employers didn't tell me I was working for a COVID patient</u>
- Kaam wali chahiye? Meri biwi ko rakh lo! Life is very frightening for domestic workers right now
- I was scared to take care of a COVID positive patient, but I was desperate too
- The debt keeps on mounting; I feel I am trapped in a vicious circle
- We're surviving this lockdown by relying on donation drives
- I tested positive for COVID and my family lost a huge portion of our income
- Kaam milega toh karungi, varna ghar hi baithna padega
- My employers aren't paying me much, but I'm grateful to have a job
- कोरोना से नहीं, लॉकडाउन से डर लगता है
- <u>Kaam karoon, ki baccho ko padhaun, ki ghar ka kiraya doun?</u>
- Yahaan zeher khane ke paise nahi hain, tika kahan se lagvayenge?

Workshops and Events



The COVID-19 Advocacy and Relief initiatives were supported by a number of inspiring women, who aligned themselves with the cause and collaborated with MFF to create awareness and raise funds to support the COVID-19 Relief Kit Distribution Drive. Any report on the relief initiative is incomplete without mentioning them:

- Ronita Mookerji, award-winning dancer and choreographer, organised Gravitate, an online dance workshop that drew registrations and donations from 25 young dance enthusiasts
- Dr. Nandita Mohan, a budding dentist, organised an informative session on dental hygiene for children and their parents, drawing registrations and donations from 12 parentchild duos
- Stuti Kulkarni, Ishani Nangia, Alea Tara Motwane, Anushka Prakash and Anuhyaa Trilokyamangalam, five young women who organised Harmony, an online musical fundraiser, that drew nearly 70 registrations and donations, with nearly 20 young people participating to raise awareness about the issue.







"At a time when people weren't doing anything for women domestic workers during this pandemic, I used to speak to them on the phone and find out how they were doing. The relationships I build through this process were very special and beautiful, because it was a relationship of trust."

- Suman, SEWA, New Ashok Nagar

Those Who Made it Happen

Ultimately, it all boiled down to the people and organisations, who supported the COVID-19 Relief Distribution Drive for Domestic Workers, and gave momentum and support to the women domestic workers fighting for their rights, fighting to overcome a crisis that rendered once-proud breadwinners helpless. MFF, PRIA and the women domestic workers extend our heartfelt gratitude to all of you. Thank you for holding us up, and helping us hold one another up.

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Collaborators:





Network for the Rights and Voices of Domestic Workers

MFF's COVID-19 Relief Team:

Domestic Worker Champions



Sarita Devi



Meera Devi



China



Sandhya



Akhalema



Monica



Saroi



Chaya



Anu

Volunteers:



Rinasha Barat



Harnoor Kaur



sonam



Aniali



Neha



Nitya Bhatt

Shivangi Prithaa More Srijita

Interns











PRIA Team:













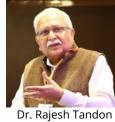












MFF Team:











Nandita Bhatt



"The relief distribution wasn't just about reaching rations to domestic workers. It was a movement, in which together, we and the women domestic workers, supported one another and held one other up emotionally."

- Savari Raju, National Domestic Workers Movement