



# IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON GARMENT WORKERS IN GURGAON

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## Crisis in the Garment Industry

The garment industry is deemed the third largest employer after agriculture and construction in India employing an estimate of 45 million of the population.<sup>1</sup> The main markets for exports are the USA and Europe, and for imports it is primarily China. India being the largest producer and second largest exporter of cotton, accounts for 25% of the global cotton manufacturing. Additionally, with the 'Make in India' campaign, the Indian textile industry allows 100% FDI under the automatic route.

India has increasingly become a prominent manufacturing destination in the global network of the garment industry. Hence with the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact on the global industry was threatening domestic manufacturers and consequently, livelihoods of scores of workers. The global industry witnessed compounding pressures on the supply and demand ends which created a crisis in the industry on all levels. As lockdowns and social distancing were mandated in almost all countries, stores and retail shops were shut for months causing unprecedented declines in sales. Similarly, consumer sentiments seemed to shift and instead of office wear and formal clothing, basic clothing became consumption priorities during the work-from-home days across several countries.<sup>2</sup>

The problems on the supply side of things primarily stemmed from economies facing shutdown on account of nationwide lockdowns. For instance, India usually imports "\$460 million worth of synthetic yarn and \$360 million worth of synthetic fabric from China annually. It also imports over \$140 million worth of accessories like buttons, zippers, hangers and needles".<sup>3</sup> This supply chain was disrupted as China shut its economy temporarily and India lacked the domestic infrastructure to provide for, or acquire, these raw materials from alternative sources. Similarly, India was unable to export its stock of yarn.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, taking advantage of their dominance in the global value chain, brands and retailers were demanding "cancellations for goods that [were] ready or [were] work in progress, or discounts for outstanding payments and for goods in transit".<sup>5</sup> In addition, retailers were refusing to pay their manufacturers and instead were asking for discounts or extensions on payments. According to the Apparel Export Promotion Council (AEPC), in April 2020 "about 65% of apparel exporters' payment amounting to at least \$2 billion (about Rs 15,300 crore) [was] stuck with foreign buyers."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fair Wear Foundation, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Textile Value Chain, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> The Indian Textile Journal, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Retail4Growth Team, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Oi & Hoskins, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Khan, 2020.

The Apparel Export Promotion Corporation (AEPC) conducted two surveys of garment exporters, with 105 and 88 exporters respectively (AEPC, May 2020). 83% of exporters reported that orders had been wholly or partially cancelled.

For orders cancelled, 72% said that their buyers had not taken responsibility for materials already purchased. Almost 50% indicated that buyers are asking for discounts on goods already shipped; 72% of them said they were asked for more than 20% discount, and 27% had been asked for discounts of above 40%.

The AEPC report also highlighted that 88% of exporters felt “challenged” in paying wages to workers. Being challenged can be understood as being a euphemism for not paying wages to workers. Having visualized the impending crisis, the AEPC had requested the government to provide funds to exporters to pay wages to workers for “six weeks or until the situation became normal”.

Surprisingly, the exporters did not even get Goods and Services Tax (GST) and other refunds that they would have expected to receive from the government even in normal times. (SLD, 2020, p.1)

The impact of these decisions of global brands and retailers were being borne by the minimum-wage workers of the industry located in countries such as India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar to name a few. While some governments, such as the governments of Bangladesh and Cambodia stepped in to help the industry and the workers by paying a major percentage of workers’ salaries for a few months, the Indian government did not offer similar support or bailout to the Indian garment industry.<sup>7</sup> The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package (PMGKP) payment of 12% of employer and 12% employee contributions towards Employee Provident Fund (EPF) accounts of eligible establishments was extended by 4 months (April-July 2020)<sup>8</sup> but the demand for a wage subsidy to avoid job losses was ignored by the government. Early estimates by the industry indicated that nearly 25% jobs would be lost in the sector.<sup>9</sup> ILO estimated that in the Asia Pacific region the “typical worker lost out on at least two to four weeks of work with only three in five workers being called back to the factory. Among those still employed in the second quarter of 2020, declines in earnings and delays in wage payments were also common.”<sup>10</sup>

The situation of garment workers in Gurgaon was similar to workers in most garment manufacturing centres in India and across the Global South. GMKS and GSK jointly conducted a telephonic survey and discussions with workers during the month of August 2020. They spoke with 100 workers across Udyog Vihar (33), Manesar (5), and Khandsa (23) and also with 14 women trainees from Jharkhand and 25 women trainees from Bihar who were part of the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) skilling scheme. The survey covered 48 males and 52 females. Our findings are discussed in this brief report.

Months later, the garment industry is showing some signs of recovery with numbers of workers increasing in the factories. However, for workers scarred by their experience during the lockdown – loss of their livelihoods, enormous hardships, feeling abandoned and hopeless – life

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<sup>7</sup> PTI, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Knowledge & News Network, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Narasimhan, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> ILO, 2020.



may go on, but they fear it will take years, if not a generation, to overcome the enormous suffering and setback and slide into poverty and destitution.

## Garment Workers in Gurgaon

Delhi-NCR is one of the main hubs for garment production in India<sup>11</sup> and primarily manufactures women's and children's apparel. The Apparel Export Promotion Council estimates that the region has 500 buying houses and 260 manufacturer-exporters.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the NCR region employs nearly 1,39,500 workers directly and 60,000 workers indirectly — where Gurgaon employs 79,500 workers directly and 20,000 workers indirectly.<sup>13</sup> These factories vary in their size; many commonly employ 250-450 workers but bigger factories employ 1500-6000 workers.<sup>14</sup> A high percentage of migrant workers are employed in these factories, predominantly from the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Migrant workers are preferred by employers as they are more vulnerable than the locals and can be easily coerced into working harder and longer for small remunerations.<sup>15</sup> There is also a weak presence of trade unions in this area.



Source: GAWU, published in Goregaonkar, 2020.

Most of the workers are contract workers who are employed via third party agencies, mostly without any formal employment contract.<sup>16</sup> However, a small number of experienced and skilled

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<sup>11</sup> Fair Wear Foundation, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Mezzadri & Srivastava, 2015, p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Roy, 2009, p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

workers are employed on the company payroll.<sup>17</sup> The work in these factories includes the following tasks: cutting, stitching, checking, thread – cutting, mending, pressing, packing, embroidering. In assembly lines<sup>18</sup> of 25-30 workers, there will also be a supervisor assigned. Master cutters, tailors and supervisors generally receive a higher salary than the other workers. There exists a gender imbalance where men hold over 80% of the jobs in the NCR;<sup>19</sup> women are usually employed in semi-skilled or unskilled positions such as thread cutting,<sup>20</sup> handwork, embellishments and in recent years a small percentage of women workers are also being employed as tailors or ‘operators’ (as they are called) in the production department. Almost the entire supervisory and managerial staff is male.

The low percentage in employment of women has also been attributed to the migration trends of labourers and the cultural specificity of North India where women’s waged employment outside homes is discouraged and in fact seen as a diminution of family status. Most male workers tend to migrate alone leaving their families behind in their hometowns and villages. In the case of pregnant women, workers are made to resign and rejoin after childbirth to avoid paying maternity benefit.<sup>21</sup> Given such societal norms and workplace biases, these low percentages have been the trend for a very long time. However, feminisation is taking place in the workforce. Women are now representing 15-40% of the workforce in Gurgaon and NCR.<sup>22</sup>

Although the manufacturing companies cater to both domestic and international markets, 80% of the production is exported.<sup>23</sup> These firms commonly export for brands like H&M, Zara, J Crew, American Eagle, Marks and Spencers, Gap, Banana Republic, Armani, Nike etc. These brands usually place their orders 6 months before a fashion season and keep their suppliers on a 3 month payment cycle.

## Lockdown Induced Crisis in Gurgaon

On 24 March 2020 at 8pm, the Prime Minister announced a 21-day nationwide lockdown starting from midnight, i.e. 25<sup>th</sup> March. Its effects on the garment workers were almost immediately. GMKS and GSK jointly conducted a telephonic survey among 100 workers across Udyog Vihar (33), Manesar (5), and Khandsa (23) and also with 14 women trainees from Jharkhand and 25 women trainees from Bihar who were part of the DDU-GKY skilling scheme.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Assembly lines could vary in size. “The length of the assembly line in terms of activities involved is somehow directly related to the number of machines involved as well as the complexity of the garment produced. The length of the production chain varies from those involving 12 to 13 people to around 100 to 140 people, especially in large factories in the case of making trousers”. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Mezzadri & Srivastava, 2015, p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> Fair Wear Foundation, 2019, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Mezzadri & Srivastava, 2015, p. 74.

The survey covered 48 males and 52 females. The majority of the workers whom the GMKS and GSK team was able to contact for the survey were staying in Delhi (Kapasedha) and Gurgaon and only a handful had gone home; but had returned by the time of the survey.

In Udyog Vihar and Khandsa most workers were paid by the company - 18 and 16 respectively; while a small number were paid by contractors - 3 in Udyog Vihar and 6 in Khandsa. 1 worker was paid by a fabricator in Udyog Vihar, while in Khandsa 1 worker reported a mixed system of payment – regular payment was done by the company and if any cash payment was to be done, it was done by a contractor (perhaps for overtime).

In Udyog Vihar 10 workers had between 1-5 years of experience, 5 had between 5-10 years of experience, while 8 had over 10 years of experience. In Khandsa, 8 workers had between 1-5 years of experience, 2 had between 5-10 years of experience, 4 had between 10-20 years of experience and 9 had over 20 years of experience in the garment industry. Among the trainees from Jharkhand and Bihar their experience ranged from a few months to 14 months for those who got employment after training.

### Udyog Vihar

Years of experience	Number of workers
0-1 Year	1
1-5 Years	14
5-10 Years	5
10-20 Years	8

### Khandsa

Years of experience	Number of workers
1-5	8
5-10	2
10-20	4
Over 20	9

### Manesar

Years of Experience	Number of Workers
Less than an year	1
1-5	1
5-10	2
Over 10 years	1

### Jharkhand

Years of Experience	Number of Workers
Less than an Year	7
1-5 Years	1
5-10 Years	2
More than 10 Years	2

## Bihar

Years/Months of Experience	Number of Workers
Less than 6 Months	10
6 Months- 1 Year	5
1- 5 Years	3
More than 5 Years	1

*\*Note: The difference between the number of respondents and number of workers whose work-experience are accounted for in the study is due to many respondents still being in their training/apprenticeship stage which was disrupted due to the lockdown and (most of these respondents are from Jharkhand and Bihar were many respondents were trainees).*



Source: Sharan, 2014.

## Work Experience of all Respondents

Years of Experience	Number of Workers
0-1 Years	24
1-5 Years	28
5-10 Years	13
10-20 Years	16
Above 20 Years	9





## Patterns of Violation in During the Lockdown

### State of work

#### During the Lockdown : 22 March - 31 May 2020

As soon as the lockdown was announced, there was much confusion among workers about whether they should go to work or not. While the Haryana government rolled out orders for people to stay home and not step out of their houses, employers and managers were still calling workers to report to work. Fearing loss of employment, workers did attempt to go to work but several were stopped by police. A worker had to request the help of GMKS to be released by the police.

There were also problems at the factories where workers managed to reach on 25 March, the first day of the lockdown. In Udyog Vihar, at several factories, complaints were filed about continuing operations. Police were patrolling the industrial estates and ordering factories to shut down immediately. At one of the largest companies, workers were locked inside the factory and put to work. They managed to call the GMKS and GSK organizers for help, who in turn reported it to local police stations and the police reached the factories to release workers and send them home, while warning the company management of penalties and action if they continued to disobey government orders. These issues persisted for a couple of days after the lockdown was announced.

Several domestic workers shared their dilemma and were guided by the GMKS organizer to inform their employers about police action and penalties and to decline reporting to work. The

fear of the virus gave uncommon strength to the workers and they were able to withstand employer pressure with some even telling their employers off.

Workers, with whom GMKS and GSK teams spoke to during the lockdown, shared that some maintenance and housekeeping staff were required to report to work every day for a few hours, during which time they were tasked with sanitizing the factories and the machines. Security staff was reduced but not removed entirely. Factory management sought permission and passes for such workers to commute during the lockdown.

The lockdown continued until 31<sup>st</sup> May and during these approximately 9 weeks, some garment manufacturing companies called in small batches of workers to stitch masks, medical gowns and overalls etc. Given that the majority of the workers had returned to their homes across India, there were very few workers available for this work. In spite of this, workers reported getting work only for a few days a week, and then too only for a few hours per day.



*Source: zeenewsindia.com*

## **Unlock 1.0 and thereafter**

The Central Government announced Unlock 1.0 from 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020 onwards with partial relaxation of lockdown strictures. But it took some time for the factories to restart production as per government mandated guidelines as there was both confusion and uncertainty about the state of orders, payments, government support to factory and business owners.

Some workers shared that they were called back to work or were finding work in local factories. Vacancy signs went up on gates of several garment factories in Udyog Vihar. But it was unclear if this round of hiring would be short-term in order to finish older orders or if it would be a regular hiring for production of new orders. It appeared to be a mixed bag with some factories continuing to give work while others have hired and fired workers within a month. The number of workers in each factory was just a fraction of full capacity. In spite of this, workers share that except for use of sanitizers and thermal scanners at the time of entry, there was no other safety measure in place, including no social distancing. Workers wore masks but that is all. This is contrary to the experience of auto sector workers in this industrial belt who shared that there were extensive health and safety protocols in place both in the company provided transportation and in the factories.

Brands and supplier factories, along with district officials and the labour department must take responsibility to ensure that work conditions in garment factories follow the highest standard of health and safety and that the cost of meeting these standards is borne in an equitable proportion by brands, supplier factories and government. Given the severe impact on payments by brands to supplier factories and squeeze on cash flow of supplier factories, it is possible that the manufacturers will argue that they are unable to prioritize health and safety in work conditions. However brands and governments must support supplier manufacturers to comply with highest levels of health and safety protocols, especially since the workers come from vulnerable backgrounds and cannot be made to bear the burden of this pandemic either by way of lost jobs and wages or by being wilfully exposed to a virus that can potentially ravage their already vulnerable bodies.

The Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) proposed that “fashion brands respond to this urgent humanitarian crisis through a one-time brand Supply-chain Relief Contribution (SRC)” equivalent to 60 days of wages per worker. As per the AFWA calculations based on the existing data on labour cost, it will only be a 2% additional sourcing cost for brands to contribute as their Supply-chain Relief Contribution.

## **Wages**

The primary concern with the lockdown was regarding the uncertainty about payment of wages. Daily wage workers were the hardest hit as they lost employment and wages immediately. This

meant that the thread cutters, who are all women, employed on daily wages via contractors, immediately lost their livelihoods. As the most vulnerable workers, at the bottom of the pyramid, their situation, along with that of home based workers and workers employed by fabricators, was the direst.

For other categories of workers, the situation was not as dire but there were discrepancies in how salaries were being paid and how much. The Central Government first issued an advisory via the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020 asking all the employers of public and private establishments not to terminate employment of their employees, particularly casual or contractual workers, or reduce their wages. On 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020 the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) issued a binding order under Section 10(2) of the National Disaster Management Act ordering all employers to make payment of wages to their workers without any deduction for the period the establishments were closed during the lockdown. Some state governments issued orders and some advisories on similar lines, including the Haryana government. The MHA order dated 29<sup>th</sup> March was withdrawn on 18<sup>th</sup> May.

In spite of such government orders, several workers in Manesar reported receiving salary only for the period before the lockdown i.e. for before 22<sup>nd</sup> March, and only for the number of days worked. In fact in Manesar, there were also issues where factories tried not paying for the days even before the lockdown. A Manesar located factory which employs almost 1000 workers only paid the workers half their salaries. Problems of getting salaries for the month of March persisted till the end of April for many workers. Some workers in Phase 5 of Gurgaon claimed that they received salary for all the days of the month of March. Workers from Udyog Vihar shared that they received salary for the entire month of March, i.e. even for the lockdown days, but no wages thereafter. Some workers reported that they received their salaries for March, but not for the overtime hours they had worked. These amounts were subsequently paid in May by some companies.

According to rough estimates by the Clean Clothes Campaign “workers in Bangalore did not receive, on average, 50% of their regular wages or 3.16 billion INR (41.76 million USD); workers in NCR, on average, also did not receive any of their wages, a total loss of 10.4 billion INR (137.45 million USD) in regular wages; and workers in Tirupur, who did not receive any wages during the month of April, lost 8.87 billion INR (117.25 million USD) of regular wages.”

Moreover, the report finds that when factories began to reopen in May and thereafter, “only 40% to 60% of the industry’s workforce was able to return to work, either because public transportation remained suspended or because factories were not reopening at full capacity. Therefore, estimates suggest that, for the month of May, workers lost wages equal to: 2.74 billion INR (36.19 million USD) in Bangalore; 2.56 billion INR (33.84 million USD) in Tirupur; and 3.95 billion (52.25 million USD) in NCR. In total, very modest estimates suggest that the 1.85 million workers formally employed in the export-oriented CMT garment sector in India lost at least 19.65 billion INR (259.72 million USD) in wages between March and May 2020.” (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020. p. 19-20)

Several factories in the industrial belt have enrolled in the central government’s skilling scheme, DDU-GKY, and routinely bring batches of young women from Bihar and Jharkhand for training and subsequent placement in their own or area garment factories. While in training, these women receive a stipend and hostel accommodation at government cost. Several of these young women who finished their training were employed in factories in Udyog Vihar, Khandsa, even Jaipur in Rajasthan - starting their new jobs just days before the lockdown was announced. From among them, some received wages only for the days worked but not for the lockdown period; while the women placed in at least one factory did not receive wages even for the 10-15 days of work they had done. The women who had been sent to a factory in Jaipur contacted GMKS about non-payment of wages, and were put in touch with the lawyers of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) who filed complaints with the Rajasthan Labour Department and helped these workers get their wages by the end of April.

In addition, given the fact that the news was filled with reports and images of the plight of migrant workers, several state governments such as governments of Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal, announced small monetary relief for workers stuck in different states across the country, in the range of Rs 1000-2000 per person per month to be paid into the worker’s bank account upon registering on the state government website. The impact was patchy at best for various reasons - technology solutions were difficult to access for workers, the websites would crash or freeze. It took several attempts to register on the website and then a considerable time lag before the small amount was deposited in their bank accounts.

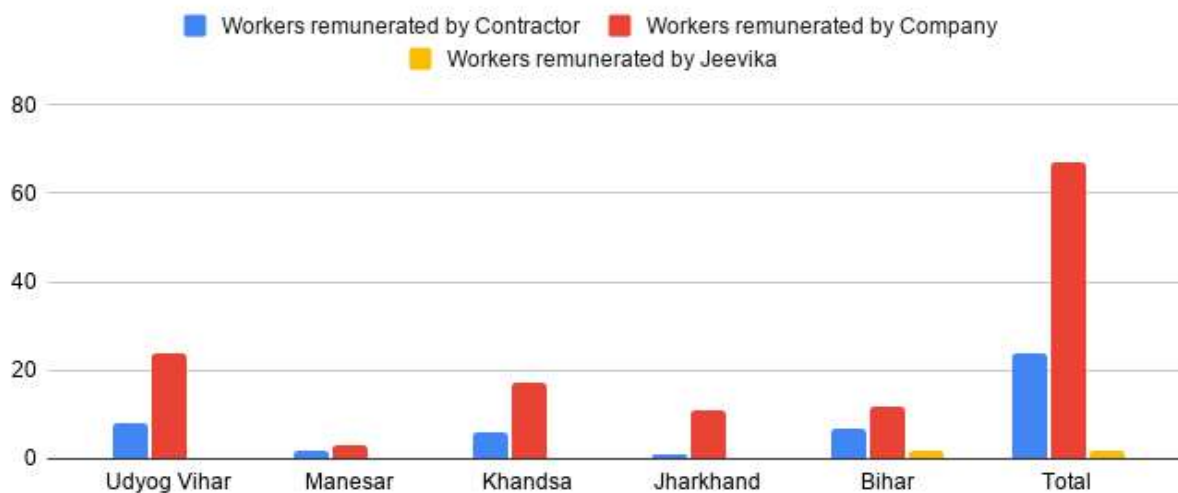
### **Share of Workers remunerated by Contractors, Companies or JEEViKA**

<b>Workers remunerated by/in:</b>	<b>Contractor</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>Jeevika*</b>
<b>Udyog Vihar</b>	8	24	
<b>Manesar</b>	2	3	
<b>Khandsa</b>	6	17	
<b>Jharkhand</b>	1	11	
<b>Bihar</b>	7	12	2
<b>Total</b>	24	67	2

*\*Note: Bihar State Rural Livelihoods Mission also known as JEEViKA has a skilling programme, tied in with the central government’s DDU-GKY scheme through which trainees are given a monthly stipend.*



## Workers remunerated by Contractors, Company and Jeevika

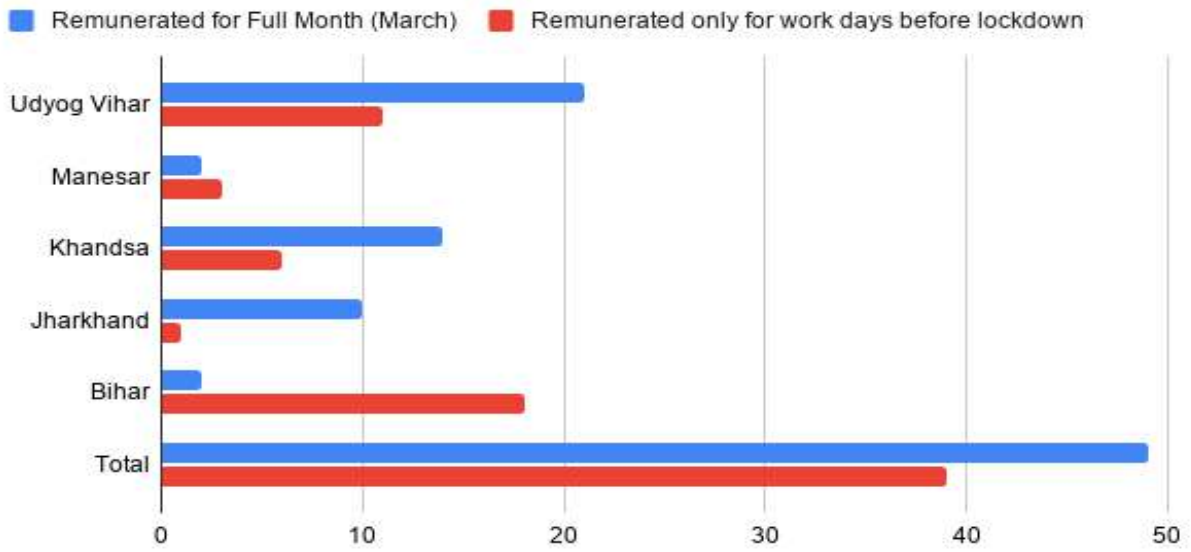


### Share of Workers remunerated by Contractors, Companies or JEEViKA

#### Salary Cuts for the Month of March

	Remunerated for Full Month (March)	Remunerated only for work days before lockdown
Udyog Vihar	21	11
Manesar	2	3
Khandsa	14	6
Jharkhand	10	1
Bihar	2	18
Total	49	39

## Salary Cuts for the Month of March



Salary cuts for Month of March

## Chaos, Confusion and Hope

The sudden loss of jobs and income and severe restrictions on mobility resulting from the lockdown announced at 4-hours notice on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2020, all precariously employed workers across sectors were thrown into an unprecedented crisis. Food and water were the immediate worries and subsequently housing and rent emerged as a big challenge forcing workers to make the difficult choice of returning to their families in villages and hometowns by any means possible.

### Food and Ration

Immediate problems arose for the daily wage workers who live on daily wages and if there are no wages, there is no food on their table on that day. GSK reported that in Mullahera village near Sector 22, workers spent an entire day only drinking water as sustenance. However, even the workers who receive monthly wages were challenged since it was nearing the end of the month and they were running out of funds. With the supply chains of essentials disrupted due to non-movement of delivery trucks, and also perhaps in anticipation of shortages, rising prices were reported by workers as early as 24<sup>th</sup> March itself, after the Prime Minister's announcement. For instance in Carterpuri village, very close to the Delhi border and 6 kilometres off the main Gurgaon road, workers reported that shopkeepers who initially charged Rs115 for a litre of mustard oil, began charging Rs140. Within a few days the distress in working class areas became evident and hard to ignore. Several local civil society groups and ordinary residents, gurudwaras and canteens, sprung into action to organize and deliver cooked food to the starving fellow residents. As the scale of the crisis became conspicuous the central government announced on 31<sup>st</sup> March that workers would be given rations from the public distribution system (PDS) ration shops even if they did not have a ration card in the state as long as they submitted details of their Aadhar card. Government announcements were not followed by immediate issuance of government orders and workers were left in the lurch. For example, in places like Kapashera located in Delhi on the Haryana-Delhi border and home to thousands of workers who work in factories in Udyog Vihar or in workshops of fabricators, workers queued up the next morning outside PDS shops but did not receive any ration as shopkeepers claimed that they had not received the government order.

GSK and GMKS started receiving distress calls almost immediately. As part of the Gurgaon Nagrik Ekta Manch (GNEM), as well by getting in touch with other organisations such as the Ideal Youth for Revolutionary Changes (IYRC) that were trying to address the hunger of workers, GSK and GMKS were part of a network of organizations that pooled in resources and contacts and started cooked food and dry ration delivery to workers in distress. GSK and GMKS addressed needs of workers in the following areas: Kapashera, Dundahera, Mullahera, Bijawasan, Carterpuri, Sarahaul, Samalka, Shalapur, Dharam Colony, and Khandsa.



Source: news18.com

This distribution was done keeping in mind the need of social distancing and the necessary precautions against the virus. At the sites, the volunteers also took on the task of spreading awareness and information about the virus and means of being safe.

At the start of the lockdown, GMSK and GSK also assisted in making sure that PDS shops were functioning as required to. There were issues in Sikanderpur Ghosi where shops would remain open for a very short amount of time. With the help of the GNEM, the Gurgaon District Commissioner (DC) was contacted to make sure that regulations were followed by shopkeepers.

Some areas were particularly difficult to service due to competing political interests and the need for local strongmen to seize all relief materials entering the area for distribution only in their constituency. GSK and GMKS roped in the help of local people they knew in order to negotiate these treacherous waters. In some cases, food and ration was brought to a central location on the main road and workers were asked to come out of their labyrinthine colonies to collect. Workers did share that there they had to avoid both policemen who were blindly stopping people's movement and locals who wanted migrant workers to stay confined to their homes, because of their biased perception stigmatizing migrants as carriers of the deadly virus. Even in the best of times the equations between the local residents and migrant workers is tenuous and riddled with tensions. In a climate of fear and paranoia this tense equation became a severe challenge. GMKS and GSK jointly delivered rations to approximately 600 families.

### **Ration Relief Data**

<b>Place</b>	<b>Number of Workers</b>
Kapashera	160
Mullahera	19
Sarahaul	33
Dundahera	14
Bijwasan	144
Khandsa	69
Samalkha	3
Katarpuri	2
Manesar	3
Salapur	7
Others	146
<b>Total</b>	<b>600</b>

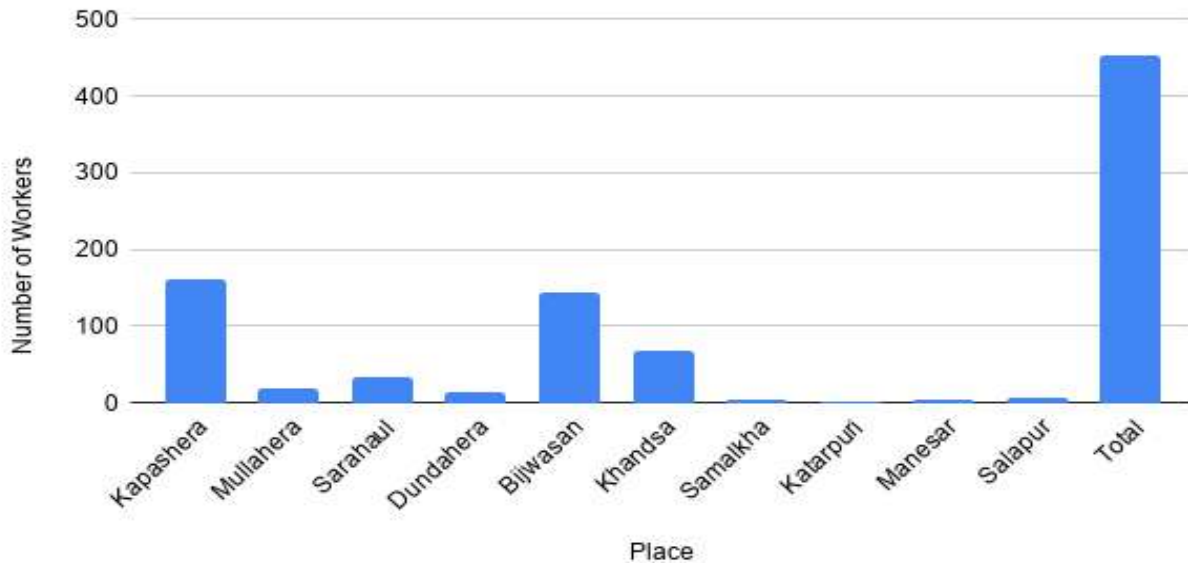
Workers also shared that short supply of water was causing anxiety as well as hardship. Everyone was instructed to wash their hands for 20 seconds every 2 hours. In addition, with entire families stuck at home for days on end, the meagre water supply was proving to be inadequate and also became a source of fights between neighbours.

### **Rent and Housing**

The 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020 order of the Ministry of Home Affairs instructed that landlords shall not demand rent from poor workers and migrant labourers for one month, adding that landlords who threw their tenants out would face action. In addition, the order instructed states to make adequate arrangements of temporary shelters and provisions of food for people stranded due to the lockdown.



## Ration Relief Data



However, the government order did not deter landlords from harassing their tenants. Workers were scrambling to put food on the table and with salary payments being uncertain and not being paid in full or not being paid at all in some instances, the priority and ability of workers to pay rent was reduced severely. Some workers living in Mullahera shared that their landlord had been insisting on payment of rent since the lockdown. Similar grievances were reported from Khandsa where quarrels broke out between workers and the warden in a women's hostel. Workers claimed that they were not allowed to talk to each other, they were not allowed water, the food they received was burnt and stale on many occasions, and rooms were overcrowded and stifling. The distress caused by living conditions was reported from several areas. Workers were also being verbally abused constantly and threatened by landlords due to their inability to pay rent.

GSK and GMKS had to seek help from sympathetic local people as well as the local police stations and beat constables tasked with patrolling the area, who either persuaded or threatened arrest if landlords did not stop harassing the workers for rent. In addition, GSK and GMKS disseminated phone numbers of local station house officers (SHOs) in each area that they were working in and with a little guidance, even first time women workers were able to push back against harassment by landlords and call the police when required. However, the continuing extension of the lockdown finally wore down the workers' resolve and resistance and over the course of the months of May and June most workers had left the area to return home.

In June and July GSK and GMKS had discussions with the workers who did not 'go back'. They found that it was primarily workers who had moved nearly a decade ago to Gurgaon and held local ration cards, as well as had multiple wage earners in the family, who stayed. These workers

shared that after so many years in Gurgaon this was their home now and they did not have anything to return to. In addition to making their lives here, they had managed to carefully put together some savings, however small or meagre, that reduced the pressure on them. These workers emphasized that having a local ration card enabled them to procure the enhanced amount of rations (grains, rice, flour, lentils, oil etc) and this was a key element keeping them from destitution during the days of the lockdown and lack of employment.

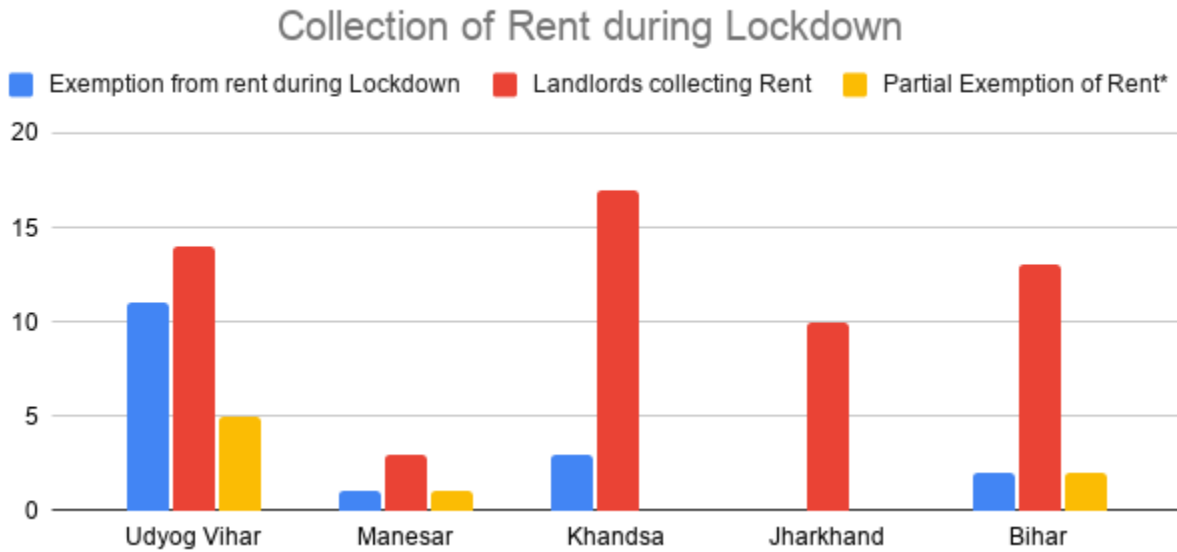
This access to food or lack of it, played on the sense of self-respect and dignity of several workers with whom GSK and GMKS spoke. Even as they reached out to workers with cooked food and rations, many repeated, *ye toh thik hai didi lekin kisi tarah hume ghar bhijwa dijiye, kitne din koi hume khilayega* (all this is fine sister, but please send us home somehow, how will someone feed us) or *kamate the khaate the, ab toh bhikari ban gaye hain* (we used to eat on the basis of our earnings, now we've been reduced to beggars). It was distressing for both the workers and GSK/GMKS who felt helpless at not being able to persuade workers to stay and not undertake the long walk home; or to make sense amidst the chaos to be able to give information to the workers about transportation arrangements for going home. GSK/GMKS and all the volunteers felt that they had collectively failed the workers. It was only much later after the distress had subsided that questions were raised about the lack of notice and preparedness of the government before taking the momentous decision of a strict national lockdown that ended up pushing the already precarious workers over the edge and subjected them to immense unnecessary hardship.

### Collection of Rent during Lockdown

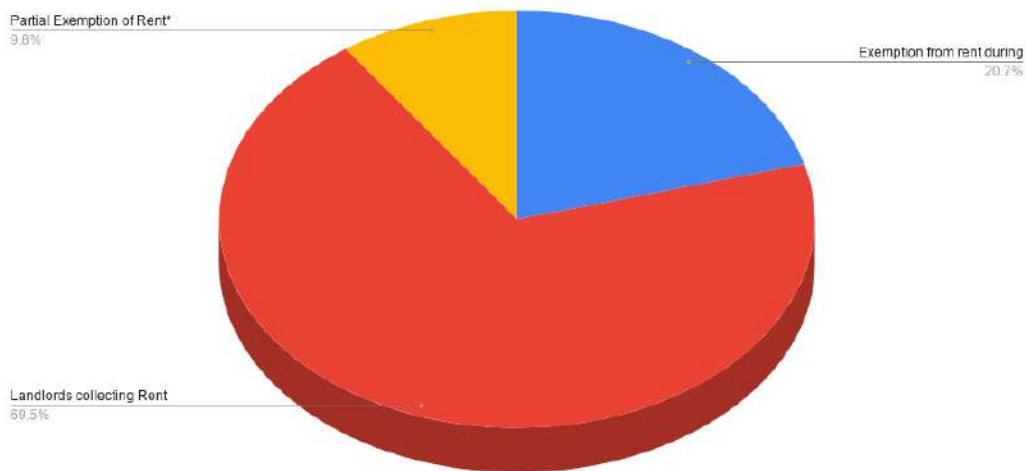
	<b>Exemption from rent during Lockdown</b>	<b>Landlords collecting Rent</b>	<b>Partial Exemption of Rent*</b>
<b>Udyog Vihar</b>	11	14	5
<b>Manesar</b>	1	3	1
<b>Khandsa</b>	3	17	0
<b>Jharkhand</b>	0	10	0
<b>Bihar</b>	2	13	2
<b>Total</b>	17	57	8

*\*Note: Partial Exemption entails landlords exempting tenants from paying one month's rent, electricity bill for a month etc.*

## Collection of Rent



## Collection of Rent (Total)



## Access to health services: ill health, anxiety and stress, paranoia and uncertainty

The perils of lockdown had severely impacted the health-care services across the country with very few beds available for patients suffering from Covid or related ill-health. Mortuaries were filled beyond capacity and there was reluctance to deal with the bodies of the deceased. There had been instances whereby patients had to share the general ward with deceased patients for

prolonged stretches of hours<sup>24</sup>. The lack of infrastructure to handle such a situation was evident across all over India, which made access to health-care very difficult, especially for people from the lower strata of the population.



Source: theeasternlink.com

Workers expressed their anxieties and stress about lack of access to timely healthcare, ambulance services and the despair of watching fellow residents succumb to either suspected but undetected Covid or pre-existing medical conditions for which no medical help or attention was available since all medical personnel and hospitals were dealing with Covid-related emergencies. Workers also shared that given the fear of contracting Covid on stepping out, many of them, their family members and neighbours, deliberately did not step out to seek medical help. Chaos at hospitals and the strict vigil/restrictions by the police were also deterrents to seeking/availing timely medical services.

### **Withdrawal of Provident Fund and undertaking Loans**

The sudden imposition of lockdown led to desperate measures from workers due to the limits of cash flow and income. Many workers resorted to withdrawing money from their provident fund, although many respondents who were informally employed either did not have provident fund accounts or were not able to withdraw from them. Many respondents had to take loans to fend

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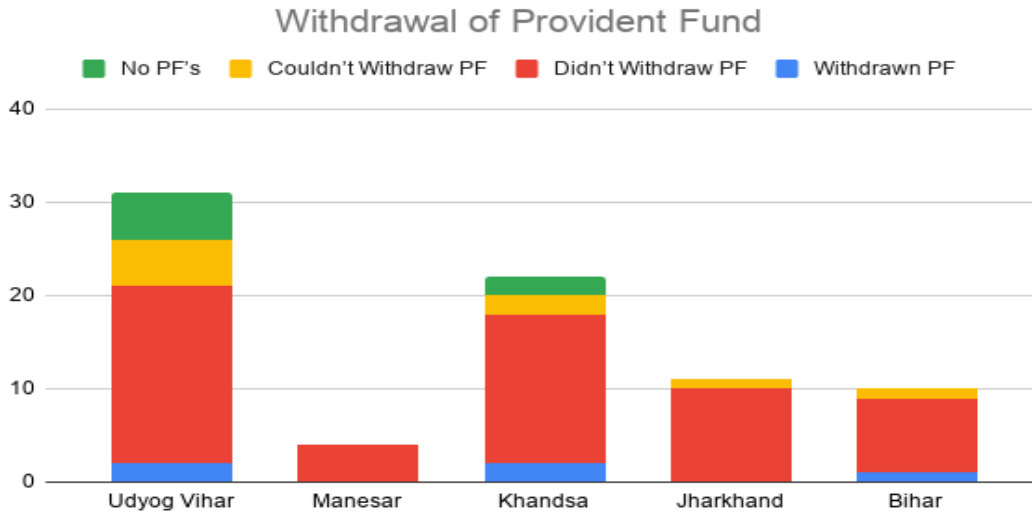
<sup>24</sup> Jose, 2020.

for the expenses that the lockdown imposed on them. These expenses were mostly house rent and food supplies.

### Withdrawal of Provident Fund

	<b>Withdrawn PF</b>	<b>Didn't Withdraw PF</b>	<b>Couldn't Withdraw PF</b>	<b>No PF's</b>
<b>Udyog Vihar</b>	2	19	5	5
<b>Manesar</b>	0	4	0	0
<b>Khandsa</b>	2	16	2	2
<b>Jharkhand</b>	0	10	1	0
<b>Bihar</b>	1	8	1	0
<b>Total</b>	5	57	9	7

### Withdrawal of Provident Fund

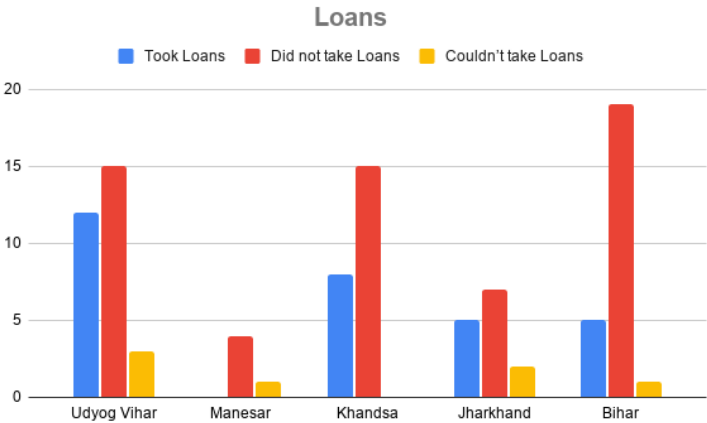




	Took Loans	Did not take Loans	Could not take Loans
<b>Udyog Vihar</b>	12	15	3
<b>Manesar</b>	0	4	1
<b>Khandsa</b>	8	15	0
<b>Jharkhand</b>	5	7	2
<b>Bihar</b>	5	19	1
<b>Total</b>	30	60	7



Source: nationalherald.com



## Women Workers

During the lockdown, some women were still working from their homes. They were involved in the thread cutting, packing and tailoring of the orders before the lockdown.

There was a worrying rise in domestic violence against women during this period. Families were living in close quarters with very little to do. In the cases that were reported, the husbands were heavy drinkers who became increasingly restless during the lockdown and ‘took it out’ on their wives. If the case was reported to GMKS/GSK, they would try to mediate between the couple and/or offer to connect them to counselling services.

Additionally, most women workers were primarily daily wage earners who lived paycheck to paycheck. Most of their daily wages were spent on their daily ration. Hence with the lockdown, they were hit the first and hardest, with no savings to fall back on.

The workers in general were able to survive for the first couple of days of the lockdown as they still had money. But as the lockdown dragged on, workers decided to return to their hometown by any means possible – on cycles, on foot, via exorbitantly priced buses and taxis, and shramik trains that the government was arranging.



Source: Al Jazeera English

## Making their way home

Many factors influenced the experience of workers going back home, especially in terms of the urgency that the migrant workers faced for heading back to the place of their origins on account of depleting savings, food and ration supplies; how long they had been staying in the city as workers; and their density of their social and kinship network in the city, to whom they could turn to for help. The lockdown severely impacted workers who had meagre savings and were subsisting within the city on a hand-to-mouth basis. It was hardest for them to make it back to their homes because of the lack arrangements of public transport by the government. Many had to pay exorbitant prices for the arrangements to make it back home. Some workers tried to hitchhike and were charged large sums of money from truck drivers to drop them to the place in close proximity to their hometowns or villages, from where the workers would walk to their villages. The trucks were crammed with people trying to make their way back home, and some respondents shared that there were as many as 70 people in the trucks along with the cargo that was being transported via the vehicle they managed to hop on. Many respondents highlighted that they needed to borrow money from friends or family to be able to pay for these travel arrangements. There were also instances when the police intervened and disrupted their journey home but many also recalled how police and locals helped them with food and water along their journey. The workers leaving from Gurgaon faced additional hardships as the arrangements made by the Haryana state government were chaotic and inadequate and also not communicated properly. Workers shared sitting at the departure point in the city of Gurgaon for days on end with little or no food and water because of such lack of communication and chaos. They had no option but to sit there as they had already vacated their rooms and had nowhere to go. In addition, they were afraid of missing out on the bus/train home whenever it would depart, since information was barely forthcoming and there was confusion and chaos all around about the train/bus schedules, procedure for registration, fare, whom to pay the fare etc. As early as May Jha (2020) reported that officials confirmed that the train and bus schedules had not been made public and workers were being selected by officials to board the trains/buses from among those staying in shelter homes or registering online. However, the chaos and confusion continued for months and imposed extreme hardship on migrant workers battling hunger, fear, confusion, feeling of helplessness and abandonment.

In addition, travel in the Shramik train services started by the Indian Railways on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2020, commencing 38 days after the lockdown was imposed, was extremely arduous, uncertain and challenging with workers stranded in these trains without food and water and trains being diverted on long detours before reaching their final destinations. Such chaos claimed lives of 97 migrant workers.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Pandey, 2020.



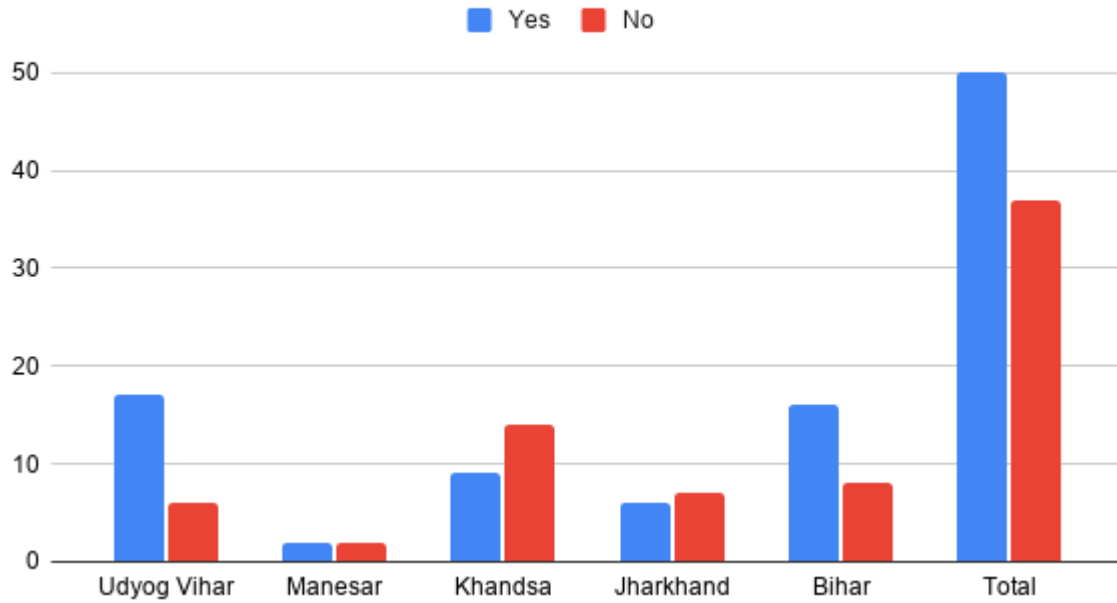


Source: idipankan.com

### Workers Who Returned to their Villages

	Yes	No
<b>Udyog Vihar</b>	17	6
<b>Manesar</b>	2	2
<b>Khandsa</b>	9	14
<b>Jharkhand</b>	6	7
<b>Bihar</b>	16	8
<b>Total</b>	50	37

## Workers returning to their Villages



Source: Deccan Herald

### Self-organizing and organizing to help fellow workers

It is common knowledge that there are very few unions among garment workers – a combination of their precarious employment conditions as well as the union-busting attitudes of employers and lack of support from the labour department. The lack of support of a union was acutely felt during the lockdown. This prompted several groups of workers to self-organize and help each other. The impetus came from the slightly more securely placed workers – who either had



regular employment contracts or had been living in the area for several years and were not as vulnerable as the recent migrants. With help from GSK and GMKS, small teams were organized in several localities and landlords were spoken to, rations and cooked food were arranged and transported, lists of workers in need with details of their needs were prepared and shared and addressed as expeditiously as possible. Networks emerged to help workers register on online portals to avail of the small monetary benefits that their home state governments were offering, and to register for Shramik trains. Several workers with motorcycles created rotating shifts to venture out of cordoned zones to fetch rations from GSK/GMKS collection points and distribute among households in their localities. The failure of district and state government stood in stark contrast to the initiative and innovative mobilizing of civil society and workers' collectives that formed overnight for mutual help.

The feeling of abandonment by government was counter posed to the collective action of fellow workers and workers' collectives, prompting many workers to shed their inhibitions and fears about joining or forming collectives or unions. Many workers shared that joining a workers' collective or union during the pandemic, made them more aware of their rights as workers and as citizens while also giving them support in their time of need.

## Recovery

With a failed lockdown which brought to global attention the plight of migrant workers and daily wage earners, the question that looms over brands, manufacturers and governments is two-fold – *how to recover from this; and how to avert such immense human suffering in the future*. To answer this question one must first reflect on what these recovery policies are aiming for. Most government initiatives seem to prioritize restoration of demand and supply chains as quickly as possible with hopes that its effects will trickle down to those worst impacted. However the government must recognise that the reason this lockdown caused the worst<sup>26</sup> domestic migrant workers' crisis is not just the result of the pandemic or of global factors. There exist several inadequacies with government policies and labour laws which must be addressed.

According to a report by the Society for Labour and Development<sup>27</sup> migrant workers were refusing to return to Delhi-NCR even as garment factories were opening up. Their primary concern is regarding security - job and health security as well as security from the immense uncertainty, chaos and abandonment they faced.

Some of the respondents shared that the cost of returning to an uncertain job market far outweighed any benefits of earning a livelihood. Given that orders for the next season are placed 6 months in advance, workers, contractors, employers and experts were certain that orders for the spring season was a lost cause. There is uncertainty about resumption of orders from global buyers for the summer season as well. Workers worry that they will experience similar threats of lay-offs and salary issues in the future.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, it is commonly known that garment workers “maximize their earnings through overtime work, so that they may be able to survive and send money to the household members left behind in their home villages”<sup>29</sup> and they believe that their chances of getting overtime work are reduced and they will not be able to survive on the low wages that prevail in the garment industry, which only makes them more sceptical of returning.

As of June 2020 most factories in Delhi-NCR have resumed operations. Even prior to the lockdown, these factories lacked facilities to ensure worker safety and there seems to be little effort to ensure worker safety post lockdown too. The COVID-19 prevention guidelines which require hand wash, wearing of masks and social distancing are not being enforced appropriately in the factories.

The government will also have to be proactive in infusing the industry with money and easing the financial burden on MSMEs. For instance, exporters are required to pay GST upfront and

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<sup>26</sup> Infante, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Society for Labour and Development (SLD), 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Crump, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> SLD, 2020, p. 11.

receive a refund within 30 days; but that has not been the case in reality due to backlogs. The government can quicken the process of refunds which would consequently ease some of the financial burden on several of the stakeholders. Additionally, it should make sure that the firm is paying their employees and workers on time. Increasing wages will increase the buying power in the hands of the workers and could help revive the economy.

As pointed out by Clean Clothes Campaign, it is common knowledge that garment workers in India only earn poverty wages and garment production is done in countries with weak labour law compliance and social security and unemployment benefits leaving workers especially vulnerable. In India, “the average wage of a garment worker is less than three times the amount she and her family need to live with dignity. As a result of the industry’s low wages, workers are unable to accumulate savings and are often in debt. In spite of this widely recognised reality, brands have failed to take meaningful action to improve the industry’s poverty wages, much less ensure a living wage, while they profit unfettered.” (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020)

Governments will have to work with employers and brands to address these structural problems and be committed to the cause of ensuring that garment workers receive lost wages and are embedded in a regime of labour and social protections. The new labour codes dismantle several systems of checks and balances; these systems will have to be restored and the employer and retailer will have to be held accountable in helping build their workers’ lives which the lockdown destroyed significantly.

“In April 2020 over 120 brands, manufacturers, and worker organisations, among others, 103 endorsed the Covid-19 Action Plan for the Garment Industry (“Call to Action”) to engage with financial institutions, governments, and other donors to support garment manufacturers during the economic disruption of the pandemic and to protect garment workers’ income, health, and employment<sup>104</sup>. While the Call to Action, which was facilitated by the International Labour Organization (ILO), was a positive first step towards addressing the economic crisis for garment workers, it is not a comprehensive solution to providing workers with the wages they lost due to the crisis. Moreover, the Call to Action does not set targets, nor does it provide an enforcement mechanism or consequences for signatory brands if workers in their supply chain do not receive income support.” (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020. p. 35-36)

While brands are being called upon for wage assurance, manufacturers and governments must address gaps in coverage of workers by labour and social security entitlements and address longstanding structural plaguing the industry. Formalization of employment, revision of minimum wages and wage standards in the garment industry, rescinding anti-worker changes in the new labour codes, and support for worker and union organizing are the minimum first steps that must be undertaken if the worker confidence and dignity is to be restored.

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Gurgaon Mahila Kamgaar Sangathan is an organization of women workers helping each other access their labour and citizenship rights. They focus on building leadership among women workers; conduct trainings on gender based violence, labour rights, reproductive and sexual health; and support paralegal training of women workers. They also encourage women to laugh, sing, dance, tell stories, dream, forge fierce friendships, and generally let their imagination run loose.

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Action Research Associates is a consultancy firm based in New Delhi specializing in labour research and training on issues such as industry 4.0 and future of work; violence at the workplace; and industrial relations.

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Gurgaon Shramik Kendra supports workers in accessing their labour and citizenship rights. It conducts surveys and studies; trainings with workers on labour rights, migrant workers' rights, health, and gender based violence. GSK supports paralegal training of workers and self-organizing by workers to collectively address their issues.

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