

GIRLS AND WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINES
COVID19 RELIEF WORK
14TH TO 24TH APRIL, 2020

Coalition Network:

Action India,

Bihar Women's Collective,

Bal Umang Drishya Sanstha
(BUDS),

People's Action for Change and
Empowerment (PACE),

Nirantar Trust,

Sakar

&

Sahjani Shiksha Kendra (SSK)



Report By : Nirantar Trust

MAJOR HIGHLIGHTS

Number of organizations involved:	7 organizations across 3 states
Geographical coverage:	New Delhi, 2 districts of Uttar Pradesh and 7 districts of Bihar
Distribution of dry ration and hygiene products:	1157 families
Facilitating Rights and Entitlements from Govt:	15000+ individuals
No of podcasts disseminated so far:	2 in 3 languages each (total=6)

INTRODUCTION

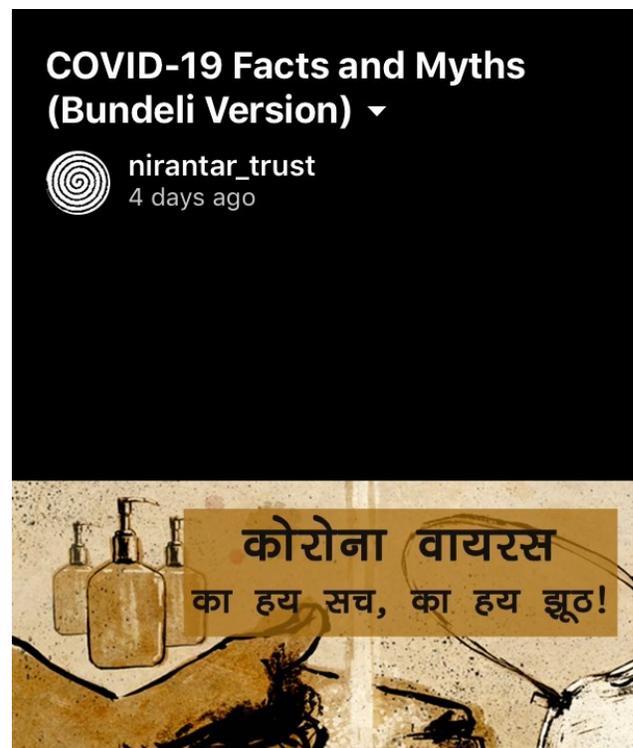
The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect various parts of the world, including India. A 21 day lockdown came into place from 24th March 2020. On 14th April, the Prime Minister called for Lockdown 2.0 which will be in effect till 3rd May 2020. This was done to contain the Corona virus from spreading further as cases were still continuing to increase in large numbers. This lockdown has affected people's lives in many ways, especially of those who are most marginalized within the marginalized communities. This includes people, especially women, from Dalit, tribal, Muslim and other minority communities, daily wage earners, many women with illness, pregnant women, single women (especially those deserted by marital family), persons with disabilities and transgender persons (identifying as men, women or in the non-binary). Although the government has initiated various relief measures and packages, in many instances, it has not been able to reach the most marginalized within the marginalized communities. Living in extreme poverty and extremely limited resources, they have been severely affected by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. In addition to this, most of them who work as daily wage earners and casual labourers have lost their jobs and daily means of income, increasing the distress of these families.

Nirantar, along with its coalition network members- Action India, Bihar Women's Collective, Bal Umang Drishya Sanstha (BUDS), People's Action for Change and Empowerment (PACE), Nirantar, Sakar and Sahjani Shiksha Kendra (SSK) - in a bid to facilitate last mile connectivity between relief measures and the most marginalized communities, have been working together in three states (Delhi, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh- since 25th March 2020. In the first phase of the lockdown (24th March till 13th April, 2020), the coalition network members facilitated provision of cooked meals to 2000 individuals, filled up and submitted online ration forms for 500 families, distributed dry ration kits to 700 families and facilitated with financial help to 200 families. Below are details of relief work done since then.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND ITS DISSEMINATION

While a lot of information related to COVID-19 has been doing the rounds since the outbreak of the pandemic, it is mostly available online and in certain languages. Authentic information was not available in local languages, leading to lack of access to correct information. This in turn led to creation of various rumours and spreading of fake news, which instilled fear among people. Moreover, their limited access to technology meant that they were also not aware of the relief measures that were being announced by the government, especially regarding ration, distribution of relief packages, and various rights and entitlements. There is also a complete lack of availability of gender sensitive material that addresses specific concerns for various gender identities under this lockdown.

The coalition members, since the lockdown began, have been vociferously working towards in collecting all the COVID -19 relief updates from different authentic sources and in disseminating this information to the frontline workers and *karyakartas* in the ground level. Their inputs are being continuously taken to understand the emerging needs in the field. This information is then further disseminated into the community, especially to the most marginalised, who do not often have access to any kind of information. Nirantar, in collaboration with Khabar Lahariya has produced 2 different podcasts 'Precautions to be taken by COVID-19 Relief Workers' and 'COVID-19, Myths and Facts', each in three languages- Hindi, Awadhi and Bundeli. These podcasts in local languages aims to make important information accessible to all. These podcasts can be once downloaded and then even be circulated offline where internet connectivity is low or unavailable. This has allowed for an even wider range of circulation.



The frontline workers and *karyakartas* have been very actively using digital medium like phone calls, SMS, and Whatsapp messages to circulate information and to create awareness among over 4000 people. Wherever possible, women and girls are even stepping out of their homes, while following strict social distancing rules. The SSK *karyakartas* acquired curfew passes to go about from village to village to create awareness and help facilitate distribution of ration etc.

Likewise, in Bihar, a team of 30-40 *Sakhis* from each federation of the Women's Collective is engaged in spreading awareness about basics of protection from Corona COVID-19, removing the

stigma around COVID-19 positive patients, and encouraging people to go for testing if they sense any symptoms. The Jyoti Mahila Samakhya(Muzaffarpur), with the largest number of *Sakhis*, has been reaching out to 20 *Sangha* members each every day to spread awareness and break myths and taboos about the COVID-19 infections.

In Delhi, coalition members shared revised lockdown guidelines with the field team members in both Hindi and English language to spread awareness among community people regarding new changes in the lockdown guidelines. In the last one week, we have also been sharing the positive news and inspiring stories to our coalition network about women's collectives who have shown leadership roles during outbreak of COVID19.



PROVISION OF COOKED MEALS OR DRY RATIONS

With loss of jobs and other means of livelihood, people from the various marginalized communities have been finding it difficult to make ends meet for themselves as well as their families. There have also been significant gaps among most disadvantaged groups in accessing the ration or cooked food due to lack of information and restricted mobility during lockdown. As soon as the lockdown had begun, the immediate work done was to identify the families that needed relief on an emergency basis. The most affected and marginalised within these marginalized have been people from Dalit, tribal, Muslim and various minority communities, single women, persons with disabilities, transgender people and so on. They mostly work as daily wage earners and casual labourers and the lockdown had put a complete stop to their means of livelihood. However, with the extension of the lockdown, number of families needing food (cooked and dry) has substantially increased, also bringing forth the increasing poverty and distress among people. In the last one week, people involved in various informal labour relations like hawkers, rickshaw pullers and factory workers were also included in the list. Apart from that, we have also support many families to receive cooked meals distributed by the government.

In Bihar, a total of 495 families were supported by the federations across 134 villages in 22 blocks of six districts namely Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi, Sasaram, West Champaran and Kaimur. The profile of the families distributed food packets and personal hygiene products (Soaps only). Each packet cost Rs. 450-500 depending on the prices of provisions procured from the village shops. Ninety eight percent of the women who were supported with ration packets belong to SC and Minority communities, and are Maha-dalits. They also consisted of widows, landless, and disabled women. This was possible with the support of a team of over 100 *Sakhis*, with 4 to 5 covering each

block, for distribution of ration packets. 71 families in Lalitpur (UP) have so far received dry ration kits consisting of dal, oil, spices, tea leaves, and hygiene products.

In Delhi and Bareilly (UP), a total of 591 ration kits were distributed in around 9 field areas to help children, adolescents, and young adults, pregnant women, migrant labours, widows, street dwellers, and transgender people. The kit included rice, pulse, wheat flour, spices, oil and sugar. In every field area, we have been focusing more on identifying most marginalised people who are not being able to access the services provided by government and other civil society organisations. A total of 800 packets of cooked food have been delivered over the week to 100 identified migrant labourers and other people belonging to most marginalised groups across all field areas.



FACILITATING PEOPLE TO AVAIL MONETARY AID

In Delhi, around 93 forms were filled for people who needed financial aid during this time of crisis. Many people who have applied for financial aid have received verification calls from organisations that are providing financial aid. Apart from rigorous follow-up with the families needing support on a priority basis, the team is also figuring out families who might need our support during the lockdown.

We have provided financial aid to total 13 families, out of which 9 individuals with disabilities were provided financial support by linking them with other organisations who were interested to support people with disabilities. We faced a number of difficulties as many of the persons with disabilities did not have the requisite certificate to prove their disabilities, which was one of the requirements to receive this monetary relief. As a result, they were deprived of this financial assistance. Another challenge was that many of the persons with disabilities did not have their own bank accounts, because of which again, they were also denied this benefit.

FACILITATING PEOPLE TO AVAIL THEIR RIGHTS AND ENTITLEMENTS FROM THE GOVERNMENT

The information about various rights and entitlements for the most vulnerable, including to mitigate adverse impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable families, was disseminated. Efforts were made to link those who got excluded due to lack of legal papers mandatory to avail these special packages and to help fill up forms for those who could not make sense of the legalese. This included access to information and filling up of forms for Cash Transfer to Jan-Dhan accounts, ensuring gas

connections under Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, receiving extra quota of ration under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, loans to SHGs, etc. With constant contact with local leaders and government stakeholders, our *karyakartas* have been able to facilitate access to rights and entitlements for many people from various marginalized communities.

In Bihar, information dissemination on the various packages was done through a large network of the Elected Women Representatives as they were anyway mandated by the government of the state to inform the target groups about these handouts and apply for the same. “Gram Vani”, a social media platform developed by the IIT Delhi, is being used by the government departments to respond to grievances reported through the App. The *karyakartas* have used this app to inform the administration about the people that needed relief on a most urgent basis. However, there has been no response on this so far.

In Mandawra, Birdha and Mehroni blocks of Lalitpur (UP), the frontline workers and *karyakartas* have disseminated information in over 50 villages that MNREGA was resuming work from 20 April 2020 as per government’s announcement. They encouraged people to join under this scheme as many have otherwise lost their jobs and daily means of income. In the same districts, the SSK members have also reached out to over 10000 individuals and helped facilitate provision of free 5 kgs of rice under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana. In certain villages, the *kotedars* were taking money for this free entitled ration. Our SSK members discussed this issue with the *kotedar* and the money was returned to the people, and free ration distributed to all. Although the information about Jan Dhan Yojana has been disseminated to the people, because of the lockdown people have not been able to access banks as there are no means of public transport. Even if they reach the bank, there are long queues of hundreds of people in the scorching heat since most of them do not have any ATM cards. A Jan Dhan Rath service will be in service shortly which will make withdrawal of money easier.

The *karyakartas* in Lalitpur have also facilitated distribution of ration under the Public Distribution System (PDS) to over 10,000 families so far. In some of the villages where the ration shops were



closed, the women spoke to the *kotedars* and got them opened. Apart from that, some *kotedars* were also taking money for the entitled free ration of 5 kg rice/wheat that was announced under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY). The women from SSK, along with the *karyakartas*, discussed this issue with the *kotedars* and got them to return the money back to the people and further ensured that the free distribution of ration was taking place.

After an announcement was made by Delhi government to provide ration to marginalised groups who do not have ration cards, we have identified people from each field areas to support them in receiving the ration. PACE teachers have since then filled up online forms for 357 people, under Delhi government e-ration coupon scheme, to avail this benefit. The team has also linked local people to the nearby Delhi shelter homes and government schools for collection of cooked meals.

PROVISIONS OF ESSENTIAL HYGIENE PRODUCTS

One of the best ways to stay safe from contacting COVID-19 is by maintaining social distance and ensuring personal hygiene. These are not privileges available to the most marginalized people who live in close vicinities and do not have access to soaps, sanitizers, gloves and masks. The coalition network identified the importance of access to these resources and decided to distribute some essential hygiene products to the people. It was also ensured in the podcasts that such information is included so that information about safety and hygiene reaches to every last person in the community. In this times of distress where few have shown courage and leadership to work on the frontlines and carry out relief work, maintaining their safety protocols is also of utmost importance.

In parts of Bihar, soaps have been distributed as part of the dry ration packets to 495 families so far. In Sitamarhi, the federation leaders and Child Line staff (Federation is the nodal NGO for Child Line in 2 blocks) - a team of 30 - were provided with masks and soaps so that they are able to



maintain the personal hygiene protocol. The masks were procured from Jeevika. This team has also distributed over 500 masks to ASHAs, Anganwadi workers and some NGO workers who have been working at the forefront in either identifying migrants returned from cities or distributing dry rations to the most needed. In Lalitpur (UP), 71 families that have received dry ration have also received soaps, detergent, sanitizers, gloves and masks. Apart from that, masks, gloves and sanitizers have also been distributed among the frontline workers and *karyakartas* to maintain safety precautions during relief work. Similarly, in Delhi and Bareilly, the frontline workers (teachers, learners and *karyakartas*) have provided basic protection kit to our entire on-ground team and the community members with protective masks and gloves. Sanitary napkins have also been distributed. In some of the field areas, our coalition network members have made local masks and distributed them in their communities.

EXTENDING SUPPORT AND MONITORING SITUATIONS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

With the lockdown, issues of domestic violence and abuse have greatly increased. Loss of livelihoods, distress and curbing in mobility has also increased stress related violence in homes. There has been increasing surveillance on the use of gadgets like phones for girls and women. Non-binary, queer and transgender persons have not been able to reach out to their peer groups and families of choice. For many, the home is not a safe space as contrary to the current jargon 'Stay Home, Stay Safe'.

This has been evident even during the course of our relief work. Many instances of people facing violence at home have come up. Out of six federations, four (Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi, Kaimoor and West Champaran) have reported increased incidences of domestic violence against women and children, especially girls. Through their strong network of *Sakhis*, the federation has been able to keep a vigil on the potential perpetrators and extend support to victims who have reported such incidences. So far, in last 10 days, 14 cases of Domestic Violence have been reported in these



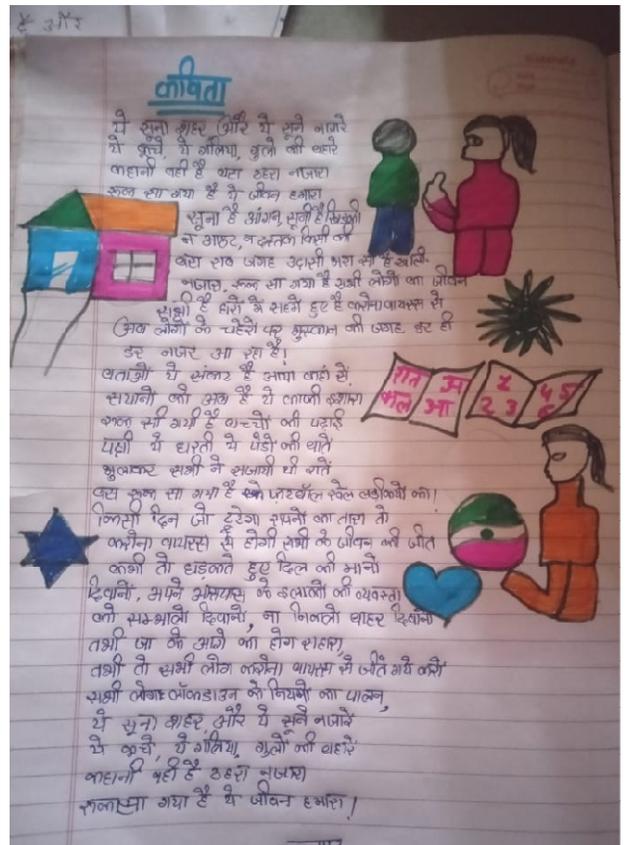
federations. They were able to seek referral support through Women's Helpline Numbers, although they reported that the response of the Help Lines was not so prompt because of the overwhelming focus of the government machinery on COVID-19

In Delhi and Bareilly (UP), since the lockdown began, mobility of our learners and community women has been restricted and there has been considerable increase in the cases of domestic violence. We have shared with our field members and *karyakartas* list of organisations providing support and counselling services in case of

distress and domestic violence.

CREATION OF A SHARING SPACE FOR RELIEF WORKERS OF COALITION NETWORK

Given that all coalition network members, frontline workers, karyakartas, teachers and learners have been working in isolation, we felt the need to create an online sharing space for everyone that have been involved in the relief work so far. Keeping in mind how everyone is involved in working closely with the community, and given the sudden need to work in isolation, especially in times of distress and crisis can be extremely overwhelming and can affect mental health. This provided platform to the team members to put forth concerns, personal feelings and share the difficulties faced during the lockdown. The teachers and learners have been sharing their experiences through writing of letters, songs and stories. Sharing one's problems and experiences in a safe and encouraging space was very motivating and helped resolve conflicts of not being able to help everyone in the field. Sharing experiences also brought forward the prevalence of stereotypical binary gender roles and how we are subjected to them every day. Their workload has been doubled as their families did not



comprehend the work done by these girls and women. They said that they missed going out to the learning centres, meeting and interacting with the learners, going to offices and so on. A huge concern that has emerged among them is about the learners' skills and are worried that this disruption will affect the progress made so far. This has been made into a weekly sharing platform where, apart from sharing of updates, will provide as a means to build perspectives to understand the COVID-19 and lockdown in the larger framework of politics, power and patriarchy.

CHALLENGES

- With the extended lockdown, increasing cases of COVID-19 and conditions in the fields getting worse, it has been extremely overwhelming for the frontline workers, karyakartas, teachers and learners. It has been mentally exhausting for them as well since they are very much a part of these communities and are also undergoing stress in these times of crisis.
- With extension of lockdown period, there has been significant increase in number of people who reach out to for support. However, because of several limitations, including that of

mobility, we are unable to help all the people in need of support. This has led to a feeling of guilt and helplessness of not being able to help everyone in these times.

- Finding a work-life balance has been difficult as well. Work-from-home is a new concept and it takes time for everyone to settle in any new routine. With a sweeping change in everyone's schedule, fitting into this new routine has been a challenge for most. A disparity in the normative gender roles can also be seen in the households. The women workers have disclosed how they have to manage and do all the house chores and also carry out all duties of being an essential service social worker.
- Many people, especially those from minority communities were scared to give up details of their documents that were needed for availing various entitlements.