

MARCH-JULY 2020

GIRLS AND WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINES

A SUMMARY REPORT



A Report by Nirantar Trust

COALITION NETWORK

Bihar: Bihar Women's Collective;

Delhi: Action India, Bal Umang Drishya Sanstha (BUDS), People's Action for Change and Empowerment (PACE), Nirantar Trust;

Uttar Pradesh: Sakar & Sahjani Shiksha Kendra (SSK)

OUTREACH

Geographical coverage:

13 districts in 3 states

Information dissemination and awareness generation:

1,60,000+ families

Distribution of dry ration and hygiene products:

6000+ families

Facilitating Rights and Entitlements from Govt:

1,50,000+ families

Podcasts disseminated

2 in 3 languages (Hindi, Bundeli, Awadhi) and 2 in Hindi

GLIMPSES OF WORK DONE

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to impact everyone's lives even today, 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.

India has been on a complete and partial lockdowns and unlock phases since March 24, 2020. Various issues emerged over time, with the different phases of lockdown/unlock phases. The Coalition members have been working vociferously on the frontlines since then on providing various kinds of relief work.



PROVIDING ACCESS TO INFORMATION

A lot of information related to Covid-19 has not been available in local languages, leading to lack of access to correct information. This in turn led to creation of various rumours and fake news, instilling fear among people. Their limited access to technology meant that they were unaware of the relief measures that were being announced by the government. There was also a complete lack of availability of gender sensitive material that addresses specific concerns for various gender identities during the pandemic.

The frontline workers are providing updates regarding safety measures that need to be taken to prevent Covid-19, information related to various Govt. schemes and entitlements, counselling support, helpline numbers for people living in stress and isolation etc. They have been very actively using digital medium like phone calls, SMS, Whatsapp messages and podcasts to circulate these information.



In a bid to create informative material regarding Covid-19 and other pertinent issues that is accessible to people in local languages, Nirantar, in collaboration with Khabar Lahariya has produced podcasts titled 'Precautions to be taken by COVID-19 Relief Workers' and 'COVID-19, Myths and Facts', 'Gender and Health in times of Covid-19', 'Mental Health of Rural Women', in three languages- Hindi, Awadhi and Bundeli. These podcasts in local languages aims to make important information accessible to all.

DISTRIBUTION OF RELIEF MATERIAL



In the month of March, the immediate need was to provide with relief kits to the most marginalized families who had overnight lost their means of livelihood as the nation-wide lockdown was imposed. Provision of relief kits have continued till the end of June, especially for the most marginalized communities and migrant families. Most of them worked as daily wage earners and casual labourers and had no sources of income to sustain themselves.

Relief kits constituted of essential ration products like rice, wheat, chana dal, cooking oil, tea leaves, biscuits etc. and hygiene products like soaps, sanitary pads,



sanitizers, and detergents. Masks have been widely distributed among people, especially those who are working on the frontlines or have resumed their daily wage work. Information about various rights and entitlements for the most vulnerable, including to mitigate adverse impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable families, was disseminated.

FACILITATING GOVT. RIGHTS AND ENTITLEMENTS

.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, work under MGNREGA, receiving extra quota of ration under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, loans to SHGs, etc. Over 1,50,000 families have been facilitated to reach the various schemes in Delhi, Bihar and UP.

ADDRESSING THE INCREASING CASES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

With the lockdown, issues of domestic violence and abuse have greatly increased. Loss of livelihoods, distress and curb 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 are not being able to reach out to their peer groups and families of choice.

The number of cases registered and dealt with by the frontline workers are as follows: 202 cases through the Women's Collectives in Bihar, 539 cases in Delhi with the support of Action India and BUDS, and 15 cases (8 violence against women- VAW, and 7 domestic violence cases) were dealt with with the help of frontline workers in Lalitpur.

Through their strong network, the frontline workers have been able to keep a vigil on the potential perpetrators and extend support to victims. They were able to seek referral support through Women's Helpline Numbers. They have also helped the families lodge complaints and file First Hand Information Reports (FIRS) when needed.



Despite their best efforts, in many cases, the report of the incidence of violence could not reach to the frontline workers due to lack of access to phones and close surveillance by the perpetrators. In spite of that, our frontline workers are extending support as much as they can and to as many families needed. They have written the helpline numbers on walls and other public spaces visible to all, so that anyone in distress or facing any abuse or violence can reach out to these numbers.

CREATION OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE SHARING SPACES

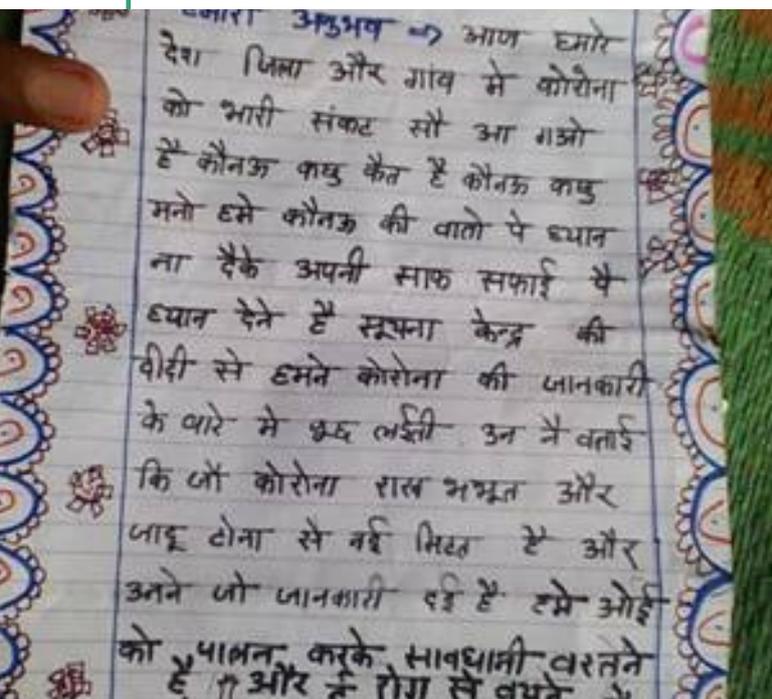
We have been working with the frontline workers to create sharing platforms—online and offline. Larger idea behind these is to create informal sharing platforms for the team to share their personal feelings and experiences. The girls and women working as frontline workers are part of the gendered society that they work and live in. As a result, they have had to manage domestic chores and care work as well as vociferously work on the frontlines.



Because of the need for physical distancing, they have been doing a lot of work online and over the phone. This has led to them getting backlash from their family members as to why they are on their phones for so long. There have been instances of surveillance and even domestic violence. The challenge also lies in that they are not able to meet up with their peers as well as learners in a physical space, which would also earlier act as a safe space for many of them. Meeting collectively and seeing each other and sharing their experiences online has helped them immensely during this period.

CHALLENGES

- Most of the relief related information and details of the schemes were available online. Majority of the most vulnerable people had no access to internet or skills to fill the online forms
- Many of the migrants who came from different cities had not undergone any health check up for Covid-19 before reaching their villages.





- It has remained challenge to negotiate with State government officials across states in helping people in urgent need of support.
- An obvious decrease in physical distancing and use of mask can be seen over time. In many places, people are gathering in large numbers and even celebrating weddings, putting themselves and others around them at risks.

- Even if they reached their villages, migrant labourers had to face violence and discrimination by both local officials and the villagers.
- Finding a work-life balance has been difficult for many as well. 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.
- A sharp digital divide between the children who belong to upper caste, economically self-sufficient families and children who come from Dalit, backward and Muslim minority households has led to differential access to education, further marginalizing them.
- With time, cases of gender based violence and domestic violence are on the rise. One of the difficulties for the frontline workers is also that it takes place within the private sphere and many a times, they do not get to know of such cases unless the women or neighbours reach out to them.



Forging A Way Ahead

People are now trying to cope up with the 'new normal'. The pandemic has impacted people from the most marginalised communities in a disproportionate way and with irreversible consequences. While the demand for relief kits has come down now, bigger concerns now lie ahead.

Education:

One huge concern has been of the high number of drop-outs from school. With families looking for extra hands for income and for taking care of dependents like younger siblings when the others go back to work, girls are more likely to drop out from school.

The frontline workers in all 3 states have been:

- monitoring the primary school admissions
- reached out to children who visit the local anganwadis to ensure that no one faces issues in admissions
- trying to advocate for fees exemption for children from very poor families so that there are no large numbers of drop outs
- planning to conduct several rounds of door to door campaigns to ensure no child is being made to drop out of school
- planning to provide incentives through paying of admission fees, buying of books, stationary and uniforms etc.

Livelihoods:

In terms of livelihoods, the frontline workers have been facilitating work through the MGNREGA in the rural areas. However, because of high demand, people have not gotten enough days of work to sustain themselves.

In Bihar, 300 households were visited for listing out their pre-lockdown livelihood sources, and to map the scale of loss and capital required to reconstruct lost livelihoods. The women discussed various possibilities, including the demand for an interest free loan ranging from Rs. 4000-8000 to get back into a source of livelihood.

In Delhi, the frontline workers have been working towards facilitating people to different entitlements and sources of livelihoods so that people can earn an income to sustain themselves. In terms of new sources of livelihood, support has also been rendered to Self Help Groups regarding income generation, through activities like honeybee breeding for honey collection, stitching school dresses and candle making.

In Lalitpur, some of the people that have had the most devastating impact from the pandemic and the lockdown are from the Sahariya community. These families had earlier depended on selling forest produce in the market to earn their sustenance. Most of them are landless labourers and daily wage workers . Alternate livelihood opportunities are also being explored by the frontline workers for these families.



Case Study 1

The Jyoti Mahila Samakhya in Bihar initiated a process called 'Hello Sakhi' through the lockdown with an objective to minimize the spread of Covid-19 infection, reach out to families facing acute food crisis, and ensure referral services to victims of domestic violence. An initiative which was started with just 5-6 Sakhis and gradually many more Sakhis became part of it. Each Sakhi reaches out to at least 5-6 women every day over phone to check if things were fine with them. Thousands of women have been contacted by the Hello Sakhi volunteers.

"Our telephone calls to the Sangha members are not limited to awareness about Corona Virus ... but also, discussions on the overall well-being of the family and the member herself. Availability of essential food supplies, threat of violence and access to special packages were some of the important aspects to seek information on" as told by Poonam, advisor and mentor to the Jyoti Mahila Samakhya federation.

Sakhis start the first call of the day at 11am. By 4.30pm they cover about 10 women. Twenty to thirty minutes or more time is spent communicating with each woman. They ask the women about other women in their neighbourhood. If there is any report about distress and adversity, they try to reach out to those women as well.

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Case Study 2

Kusum Ahirwar is a 35 year old woman residing in Mandawra block of Lalitpur district. The frontline workers met her when they were going around different villages , providing the families with relief kits.

Kusum has three children. The family does not own any piece of land in the village. Because of that, they had migrated to Delhi 12 years earlier. They managed their daily expenses by working as daily wagers in various construction sites. As the Covid-19 pandemic hit, all the construction work was prohibited and their daily means of income came to a halt. As they did not have any means of income, they decided to come back to their native village. They left from Ballabhgarh in Delhi-NCR on foot on 4th of May and reached Sorai on 16th of May. Sorai is a village consisting of the most marginalized communities, including Dalit and Ahirwar communities. In Sorai alone, 150 families have migrated back from the cities. They were examined by government officials for any symptoms and then were promised an amount of Rs. 1000. However, it has been over 15 days since they have returned and they are yet to receive that money.

They do not have any means of shelter or any ration card to access free ration under the PDS. They have been struggling ever since they returned back from Delhi. They have been finding it extremely difficult in the past few days to feed their children as well. The frontline workers have provided them with 10 kilos of wheat, and have spoken with the PDS contractors to provide them with ration in the next few days. Meanwhile, they have also aided them to start the process of getting a ration card.

- name changed

Case Study 3

"Nazrana is a 30 year old woman living in Chak Mahmood, Bareilly. She, along with other members of her family has been involved in Jari work as it was their traditional work for generations. One day Nazrana fell down from the terrace of her house and broke her hand at several points. After several rounds of operations, she recovered to an extent. However, she could not continue working as before. She started working part time as a home-based garment worker. Around three years back, Sakar team had conducted a need assessment in that locality and mobilized out of school girls to join the PACE learning course to continue with their education. She was interested and even helped the team in mobilizing other girls. When she was informed about a government scheme for persons with disabilities, she applied for pension.

Since the announcement of nation-wide lockdown, she lost her only source of livelihood because of complete shutdown of the garment industries. Basic ration and other necessary items were provided by our frontline workers. After extension of the lockdown period, she decided to look for other livelihood opportunities to sustain herself. She decided to use the money she had received as pension for the government (Rs. 2500) to buy basic ingredients for making biryani. During the Ramzan month, she started selling Biryani just in front of her house as Iftaar. She would sell out every single day. Seeing her ability to earn an income through that, she has continued selling biryani even after Eid. She buys the inventory for that day from the profits she had earned the previous day. Nazrana has now emerged as an entrepreneur and a ray of hope among other girls from the field areas.

- name changed