

# Inequality lockdown



The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on domestic workers. Deepanshu Mohan, Kensiya Kennedy, Mansi Singh, Shivani Agarwal write that deep-rooted inequality has been exacerbated

**A**n indifferent government response seen in managing the current pandemic and its economic impact is now presenting a set of scenarios that is likely to further exacerbate deep-rooted inequities, otherwise entrenched in different [socio-political](#), economic forms.

One particular group badly affected by the economic crisis, particularly within the unorganized/unsecured worker space, has been domestic workers. The plight of the domestic working class (mostly women), toiling hard in India's rich urban metropolises, often at the risk of higher exploitation and indignation by the elite class (of higher income urban households), is widely known and [written about](#).

Noted sociologist Dipankar Gupta has often written and spoken about the inherent failure of the elite middle-class residing in urban metros to relate to/with lives of these female workers, both experientially and in terms of understanding their material state of being, calling it the problem of [intersubjectivity](#).

Such concerns around 'intersubjectivity', as part of the troubled modern relationship between the elite and the (lower) working class, existed long before the pandemic, and now it seems, the divide has only been further intensified.

According to an [ILO report](#) of April (2020), estimates show that the economic crisis surfacing from COVID-19, and the government's response to it, is likely to push almost 400 million informal (unsecured) workers into deeper states of absolute poverty. This estimate includes more than 200 million women employed as domestic workers. The actual numbers may be far worse due to (pre-existing) concerns in [statistical accounting](#) of unpaid care workers.

In making sense of the micro-scenario, as part of a recent study undertaken by the [Centre for New Economics Studies](#) over last few months, we made an attempt to understand the extent to which women working as domestic

workers (across different cities) were impacted during the weeks of a curfew-style lockdown (and since the unlocking process began in some areas).

During our study we spoke to over a dozen female domestic workers across cities of Bhopal, Chandigarh and Jhansi - those being home towns of our team members who interviewed the domestic workers employed by households in their own respective residential colonies.

Our research team, conducting a mini-ethnographic survey over seven to eight weeks, explored how a pandemic induced lockdown affected female domestic workers (of different ages); to what extent the government's response

*The vulnerability of women working as domestic workers or in other unsecured forms of work has left them without any underlying social or economic safety net*

and aid support (in form of food ration) affected their intra-household consumption patterns, and given the unsecured nature of work, what are some of the psycho-social costs faced by these women domestic workers (in terms of domestic abuse and violence)<sup>1</sup>.

Whatever direct assistance was offered to the workers by the government in the form of food aid and ration-support involved serious administrative (and distributive) concerns in implementing the aid schemes at the ground level. Here, we share some key observations from the survey.

### **Lives and livelihoods**

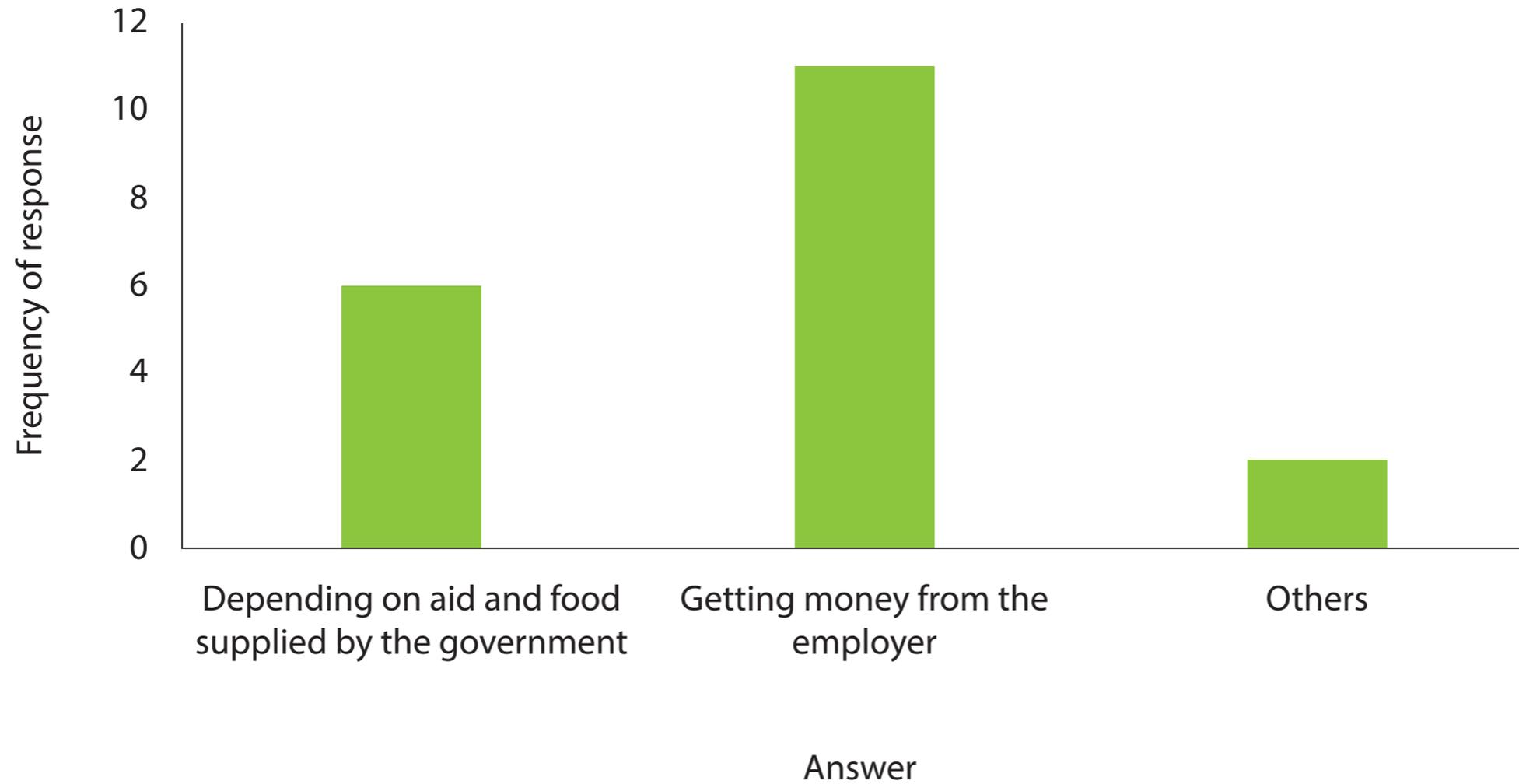
As the lockdown was enforced across the nation, many Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) exercised absolute discretion in restricting the entry (and mobility) of domestic workers in (urban) residential colonies and apartments. This made many workers to lose out on day-to-day work with very few receiving any cash (or kind) support from their respective employers.

Babita (Age: 40, Location: Chandigarh), when asked whether she received her wages from employers during the lockdown period, said, *“my employer provided with gas and money along with some other employers giving some cash money, and our family barely made it through.”*

Amongst all respondents interviewed, 85 percent responded like Babita saying that some cash-support from their respective employers helped them survive in the first two months of the lockdown period. Without the cash-support, and without any safety net, they didn't have any other alternative channel for soliciting any help (whether from the government or anyone else).

**Figure 1. Source of direct-support for domestic workers during lockdown**

Question: How did you get through the lockdown?



Most workers felt that the increased sense of social responsibility amongst the elite, higher-middle income class employers was largely because of the observed inefficiencies in the government's response to the pandemic. The glaring visuals from the migrant labour crisis across cities, according to some respondents like Babita, made most employers to pay salaries even if the workers couldn't enter their homes to work.

However, on the other hand, many who couldn't manage getting cash support or were rendered jobless because of the lockdown, were left at the mercy of the state to receive food and ration-support.

Asha (Age: 35, Location: Bhopal) said that being a single wage earner in her household, it became very exhausting for her to stand in long queues awaiting ration packages without receiving any help from her husband. She had to return empty handed on most days. As a result, she ended up borrowing most of her food ration on credit from the local Kirana store (close to her house).

Similar narratives emerged from Chandigarh and Jhansi where most respondents (like Asha) could not avail food aid provided by the government either because they lacked a ration card, or had a ration card with an address of their native village, or could not put up with long queues daily which made it difficult for them to get access even when supplies could be made available.

It was also interesting to note how most respondents (female domestic workers) said that they were asked by their husbands and other family members to go and get the ration (stand in crowded queues) which made them more vulnerable to getting infected from the virus itself.

### **Patterns in household consumption during lockdown**

Priya (Age: 37, Location: Chandigarh), when asked about how her daily household consumption level was affected

during the lockdown period, said her family and children skipped many meals across days and were able to have one decent meal in a two-day period.

She and her family survived on the food-packets they received from social organizations and other community-outreach efforts (near her residence). Her inability to receive state-provided food aid was because of her ration card address, which was of her native village and made her 'ineligible' to get the ration.

Asha too (the respondent from Bhopal) echoed the same concern for not being able to receive food-aid despite pleading to the distribution centres. She said, *"I think the people in charge of the ration centers were taking advantage of helpless people like us and hoarding government aid for themselves."*

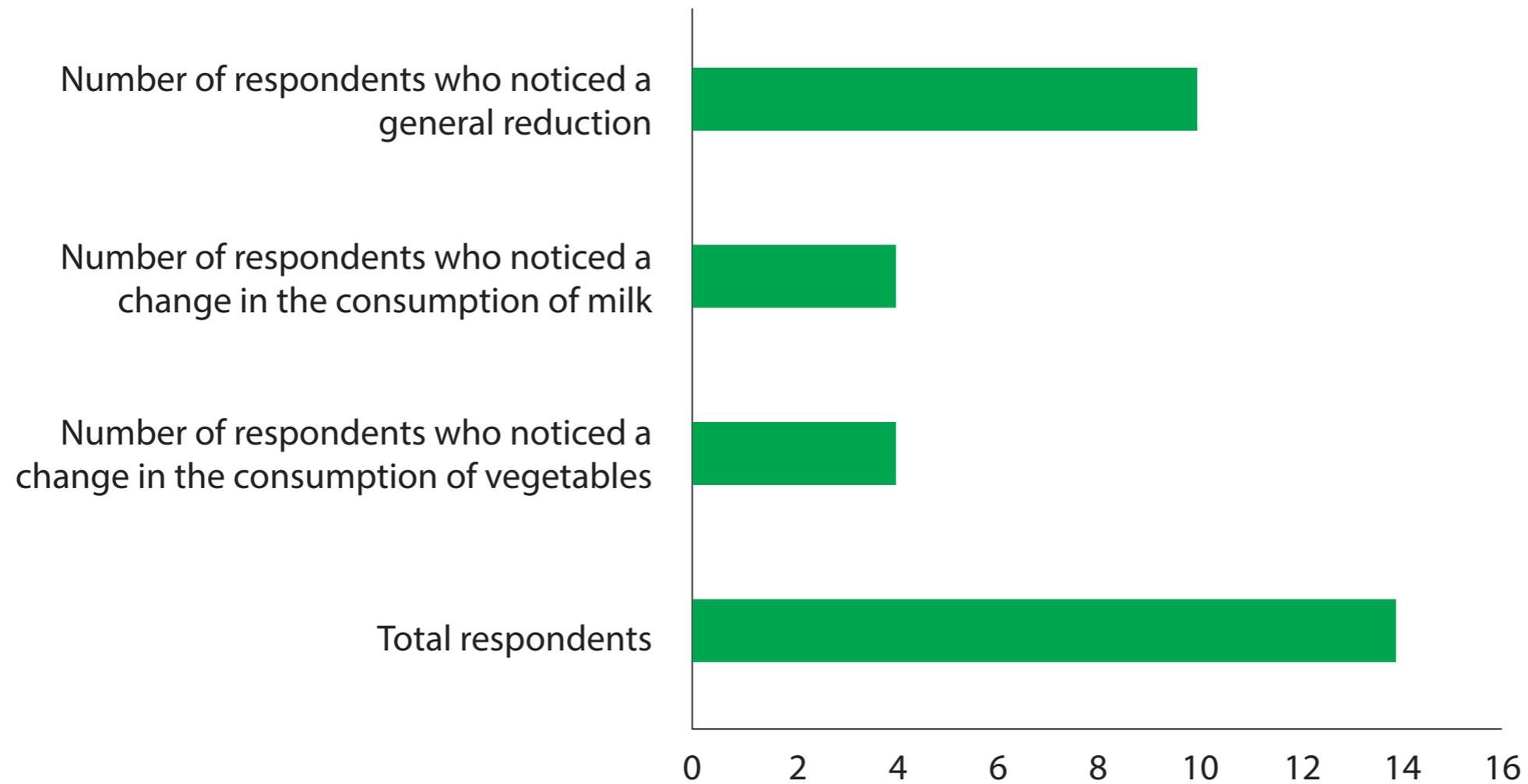
While studying the change in consumption patterns during the pandemic for most domestic workers, the most noticeable change (as seen in Figure 2 below) was observed in the consumption of milk, milk-related products, and vegetables. There was an observed reduction of up to 50 percent in consumption of milk in most households.

While for many urban and semi-urban households across India milk and vegetables are part of their staple (essential) diet, we observed how these became a 'luxury' during the lockdown weeks because of broken supply-chains.

As a result, many female respondents with children of one or less than one year found it difficult to provide basic nutrition and milk to their children. Most had to borrow money from people nearby to buy milk (at higher prices) to offer to their children. While many, couldn't.

**Figure 2. Patterns in household consumption during lockdown**

Changes in consumption post-lockdown



Aarti (Age: 45, Location: Jhansi) explained how the lockdown period saw an exponential rise in her basic household expenses. This added to her family's plight when both, her husband and she couldn't earn anything.

### **The psycho-social cost of being vulnerable**

Apart from the exacerbated vulnerabilities from external factors or a pandemic spread, this group of workers also face serious concerns in terms of mediating their own intra-household relations (with their spouse and families).

Three of our respondents, each from Bhopal, Chandigarh, and Jhansi, reported the increased incidence of abusive environment at their respective homes and seemed desperately looking to return to work despite the risk of getting infected or breaching the enforced lockdown restrictions.

Rashmi (Age: 40, Location: Jhansi) injured her right arm during the lockdown period while driving her two-wheeler. However, she could not find any assistance from her spouse or her family to get the arm treated at a clinic or a nearby hospital. She faced abuse from her own spouse and blamed his behaviour to a *"lack of a stable job."*





She has been the sole-earning member in her family and takes care of her children through what she could earn as a domestic-worker. During the lockdown, that became difficult and also led a higher incidence of domestic violence (from her spouse).

Rajni (Age: 40, Location: Jhansi) said that despite receiving her wages in advance from her employer for the lockdown months, she couldn't disclose that to her own family. This was because every month her husband and other family members would take her income for themselves without giving her much to manage her personal expenses. She feared that the advance amount would be again spent in some frivolous expenditure.

She stayed with her employer - at her place of work - during the lockdown period as she was scared of the abuse she would face at home from her spouse and family.

Two other respondents, Asha and Priya (from Bhopal and Chandigarh respectively), expressed a similar pattern and incidence of domestic violence and abuse (faced during the lockdown period). The respondents shared experiences similar to that of Rajni (from Jhansi).

In all cases, three points were common: the abuser was their husband or his family members; their husbands didn't have a job; and, they (the husbands) were alcoholic and would beat them (the respondents) for money otherwise.

In case of Asha (from Bhopal), her husband was borrowing money from one of her ex-employers, at whose place she faced a lot of abuse as well and escaped with great difficulty to find work at a new household. With her husband borrowing money from the same person, the debt is added in her name and has imposed a huge financial burden. *"This fever of COVID-19 may not kill us but hunger and debt definitely will", she says.*

Nations like the United States, Western European countries along with developing nations like Brazil, South Africa etc. acknowledged the depth of this problem and the crises' disproportional impact on the unsecured working class. It made them to expand the coverage of their state-funded emergency lending plans to cover contractual workers, gig-workers, and also others in the unorganized workforce.

However, India, on the other hand, largely left almost all of these workers (including domestic workers) to be 'hung dry', offering little to no actual support. The vulnerability of women working as domestic workers or in other unsecured forms of work has left them without any underlying social or economic safety net at this moment.

Moreover, as seen in cases of Rashmi, Rajni, Asha and Priya, the unsecured nature of their vocation has exposed each one of them to higher incidence of abuse and exploitation at hands of both the 'employer' and in their own intra-household settings.

This crisis has exposed them to higher vulnerability whilst challenging their basic livelihood and survival. As the number of cases continue to surge even now in most Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities across India, the plight of domestic

workers - and others as part of India's large informalized, unorganized workforce - may continue to further aggravate, pushing many into states of extreme poverty and capability reduction. ■

**Deepanshu Mohan is Associate Professor of Economics and Director, Centre for New Economics Studies, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities. Kensiya Kennedy, Mansi Singh are Senior Research Assistants, and Shivani Agarwal is a Senior Research Analyst, at the Centre for New Economics Studies**

*Endnote*

*1. The names of all respondents are changed to protect their identity.*