



Delhi Roundtable for Solid  
Waste Management

## COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy in Delhi, India: Continued Economic Impact and Uneven Recovery



Photo by Rashmi Choudhary for WIEGO.

## Key Findings

- **No recovery for informal workers:** Rather than abating and reversing, the negative impact on informal workers' livelihoods from the pandemic and associated government measures is continuing and deepening in 2021. There has been a staggered and uneven recovery among waste pickers, domestic workers, home-based workers and street vendors in average number of days worked, and earnings for workers in all sectors continue to be below pre-COVID-19 levels in all sectors.
- **Home-based workers most affected sector:** The story of crisis impact varies across the four sectors, with home-based workers (who were the lowest earning sector even in pre-COVID-19 times) continuing to be the worst affected. Median earnings in mid-2021 for home-based workers are still zero, unlike the other sectors where there has been some recovery of earnings.
- **Disproportionately negative impact on women workers:** Sectors dominated exclusively by women workers – home-based workers and domestic workers – are faring worse, with more unemployment, a greater fall in earnings and a lower number of working days than other sectors in the study. Even within mixed-gender sectors – waste pickers and street vendors – the pandemic has caused the existing gap between men and women's earnings to increase three-fold by mid-2021, with women's earnings falling further behind.
- **Earnings are falling while debt is rising:** Economic distress is significant at the household level: with 70% of workers reporting loss in household income level; 90% of workers who drew down on their savings to cope reported that they have no ability to replace them; and 73% of workers reported having had to incur significant amounts of debt to cope.
- **Workers are experiencing food insecurity:** Even in mid-2021, many respondents reported adult and child hunger in their households in the previous month, and nearly half (44%) reported food insecurity in the form of skipped meals or reduced consumption. This is so despite the vast majority of workers reporting having received government and MBO support for food.
- **Government relief has been inadequate to cope:** There has been little to no support from government or formal institutions during the crisis. Workers have had to cope through relying on their own savings and social networks, a point that is even more significant given that the large majority of these workers are migrants to the city.
- **Care responsibilities have increased:** Care burden continues to be high, affecting both ability to work and time spent on paid work. The burden of care responsibilities has fallen disproportionately on women which has resulted in them losing out on paid work.

## Recommendations

- **Recognition and regulation:** The government should recognize informal workers and guarantee minimum wages by bringing them under the ambit of labor laws. There must be strict guidelines issued to employers of informal workers to ensure decent pay and protection of workers' rights. The state must take active measures to extend social protection to all, such as child care, health care and pensions, and remove barriers of access.
- **Enable livelihood opportunities:** The state must take concerted action to revive livelihoods by proactive economic measures to create jobs and provision of cash grants to boost availability of capital. In the interim, income security of workers must be ensured through direct cash transfers. The state must also roll back negative measures such as closure of vendor markets and undue mechanization of waste work by the private sector.
- **Do no harm:** Law enforcement officials should not evict and harass informal workers who work in public space. Local authorities should prevent unfair regulations of private residents' welfare bodies which negatively impact domestic workers.
- **Nothing for us without us:** Informal workers and their organizations must be integrated as key stakeholders in policy platforms that impact their work.
- **Ensure decent and safe conditions for living and working:** Governments should recognize the right to decent housing and ensure the universal provision of basic services as an urgent measure required for public health. Nutrition support must be ensured through subsidized food relief (irrespective of ration card status and migrancy) and community kitchens until the end of the pandemic.

## Background

**COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy** is a WIEGO-led longitudinal study that assesses the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on specific groups of informal workers and their households.<sup>1</sup> Using a survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews, Round 1 assessed the impact of the crisis in April 2020 and mid-year 2020 compared to February 2020 (the pre-COVID-19 period).<sup>2</sup> Round 2 was conducted in mid-year 2021 to assess how workers were experiencing COVID-19 resurgences and ongoing economic strains, and to what extent (if any) they had recovered. This report presents the summary findings of Round 2 of the study in Delhi, India. Researchers in Delhi surveyed 204 of the original 265 Round 1 respondents to assess how their situation had changed roughly a year after the initial survey. Five additional respondents were surveyed. Researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with four informal workers and four informal worker leaders. The research was conducted in collaboration with SEWA, Janpahal and the Delhi Roundtable on Solid Waste Management.

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<sup>1</sup> Study cities are Accra (Ghana), Ahmedabad (India), Bangkok (Thailand), Dakar (Senegal), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Delhi (India), Durban (South Africa), Lima (Peru), Mexico City (Mexico), New York City (USA), Pleven (Bulgaria), Tiruppur (India).

<sup>2</sup> Results from Round 1 in Delhi are available at: <https://www.wiego.org/publications/covid-19-crisis-and-informal-economy-informal-workers-delhi-india>

## Informal Economy in Delhi<sup>3</sup>

The vast majority of workers in Delhi are informal workers. Estimates suggest that there are 4.92 million informal workers making up over 80% of the total workforce. Women constitute only around 15% of the total workforce, but 76.4% of women working are in the informal economy. Informal employment is also the main source of employment for men – 81.5% are informally employed. Home-based workers, domestic workers, street vendors and waste pickers together constitute around 14% of total and 17% of informal employment in Delhi. For women informal workers, these four sectors make up nearly 22% of total employment and nearly 30% of informal employment. The majority of workers in all four sectors work very long hours. They are extremely low-paid, with earnings often falling below the minimum wage standards. In all worker groups, women earn less than men.

## COVID-19 in Delhi: Key Dates

**March 25, 2020:** Nation-wide lockdown announced until April 14th, with exception of essential services. From the very next day, migrant exodus begins from Delhi and other major Indian cities. The lockdown was extended thrice and lasted until the end of May 2020

**June 8, 2020:** Phased reopening begins with successive revision of Unlock guidelines

**January 16, 2021:** Vaccination programme begins for health-care workers

**March 1, 2021:** Vaccination drive begins for senior citizens and those older than 45 with comorbidities

**Mid-March–May, 2021:** COVID-19 cases spike with the Delta variant resulting in a severe death toll and the collapse of health infrastructure. Delhi was one of the worst affected cities in India reporting above 25,000 cases and over 400 deaths per day at the peak of the crisis

**April 1:** Vaccination drive begins for all citizens aged 45 and older

**April 19:** Delhi goes on lockdown until May 31st

**May 1, 2021:** Vaccinations open up for all adults (18+)

**June 1, 2021:** Reopening after second wave begins in Delhi

## Study Dates and Sample

### Dates of study in Delhi

- **Round 1:** June-July 2020
- **Round 2:** September- October 2021<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Statistics in this section are drawn from Raveendran, G & Vanek, Joann. 2020. 'Informal workers in India: A Statistical profile'; Statistical Brief No. 24, WIEGO Publication Series. Available at: <https://www.wiego.org/publications/informal-workers-india-statistical-profile>

<sup>4</sup> The second round of the study, which was originally planned in June 2021, had to be pushed back by three months owing to the second wave of COVID-19 in the city which began in April 2021.

**Total Sample:** The sample included all four sectors in both rounds of the survey. The sample size for Round 2 was 209.<sup>5</sup>

Sample by sector<sup>6</sup> and new vs. R1 respondents

Sector	n	% of Total Sample	% Women	% New respondents
Domestic Workers	46	22	100	0
Home-based Workers	54	26	100	0
Street Vendors	61	29	38	8
Waste Pickers	43	21	27	0
Other	5	2	60	0
Total	209	100%	66%	2%

### Age distribution

	n	%
18-25	20	10
26-35	60	29
36-45	70	34
46-55	41	20
56-65	10	5
> 65	2	1

The sample is not intended to be representative of informal workers in each city or even of the membership of each partner organization.

<sup>5</sup> 61 respondents from Round 1 were not surveyed in Round 2. The most common reason for this was the inability to reach the workers due to their phone numbers being no longer valid or available. Even then, researchers made continued efforts to contact workers – physically visiting the last-known homes and workplaces of workers. In this process, it was found that many workers had moved away and there was no way to trace them. In one case, the team also came to know of the death of a street vendor respondent due to COVID-19. “Research fatigue” was cited as an additional reason for attrition.

<sup>6</sup> R1 Respondents who changed their primary occupation are categorized as “Other”, unless they have become one of the other main sectors (*street vending, waste picking, home-based work or domestic work*), in which case they are included as a member of this group. R1 respondents who have stopped working entirely or were not working at the time of survey are tabulated with their R1 sector.

## Impacts of and Responses to the Crisis

### Work, Earnings and Food

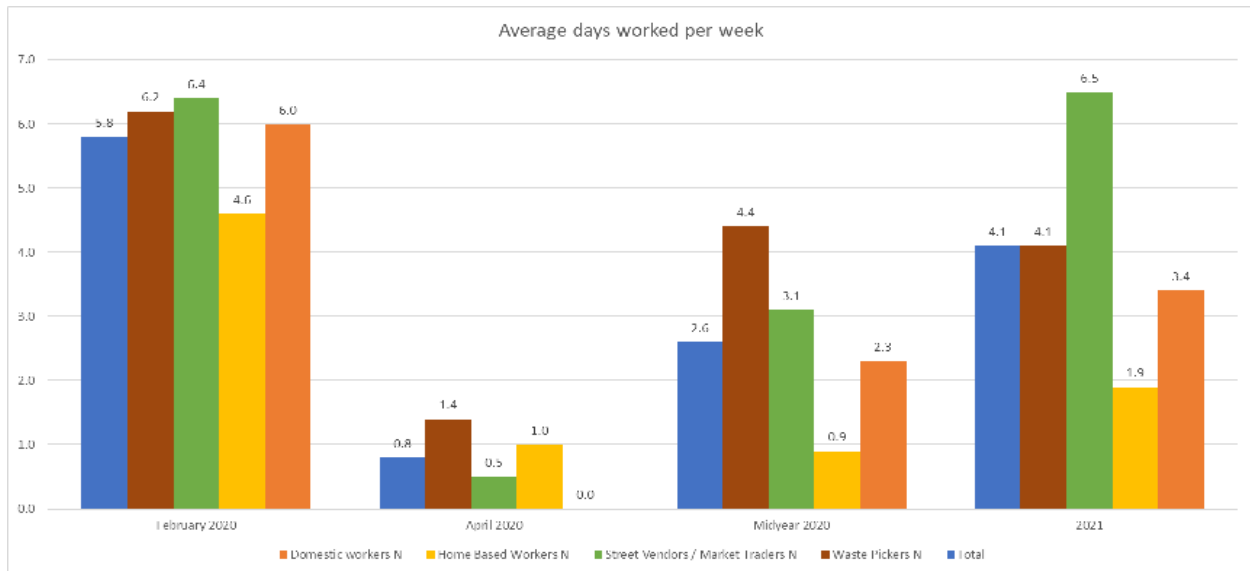
When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world in March 2020, governments reacted quickly with strict measures to curb the disease spread. In India, this took the form of strict lockdowns and stay at home orders which had an immediate and debilitating impact on informal workers' livelihoods. Over a year and a half into the pandemic, immediately following a harsh second wave, informal workers in Delhi are still reeling from the severe shock to their work and earnings, and recovery is slow and uneven. The socio-economic situation of informal workers in Delhi is nowhere close to pre-pandemic times.

#### Work

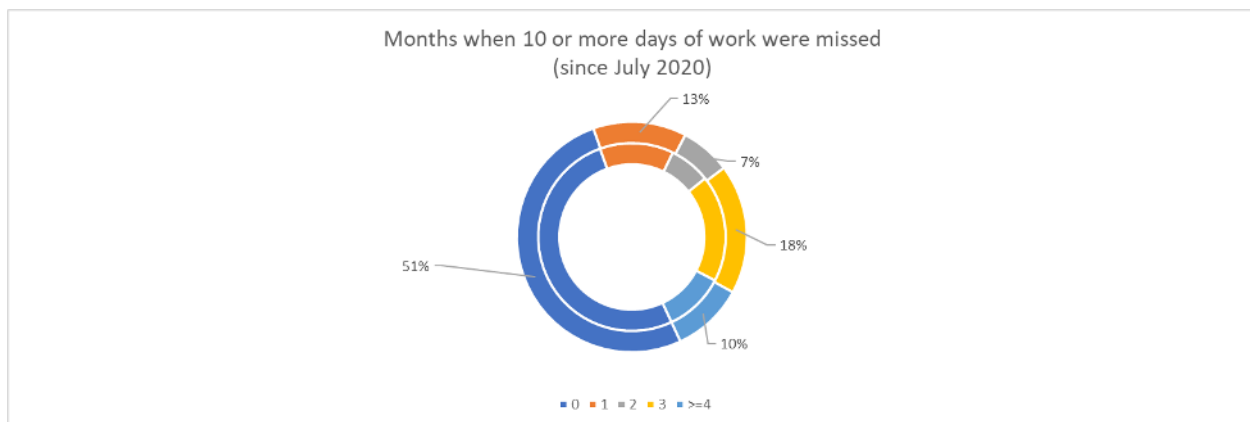
In mid-2021, when asked whether they were able to work for even a single day in the previous month, over a quarter (28%) of workers said no. If the ability to work is taken to be an indication of livelihood recovery, we see that there is slight improvement since 2020. The loss of work, set in motion by a harsh lockdown from March to June, 2020, had resulted in the majority of workers (80%) being unable to work for even a single day in April, 2020. As restrictions eased, nearly 50% had been able to restart work by mid-2020. A year later, however, the recovery has been far from even or complete. Restarting work has been more difficult for women workers as compared to men. While only 7% of men had not been able to work for even a day in mid-2021, 39% of women had not. This finding has to be understood within the context of sector outcomes – the women-dominated sectors of home-based workers and domestic workers have had the most difficulty restarting work, with 52% of home-based workers and 37% of domestic workers being unable to work for even a single day in the previous month in mid-2021.

For those working, across the four sectors, the average number of work days per week has fallen, from six before the pandemic to four in mid-2021. The average number of days worked per week has declined by half for women-dominated sectors of domestic work and home-based work as compared to pre-COVID-19 times.

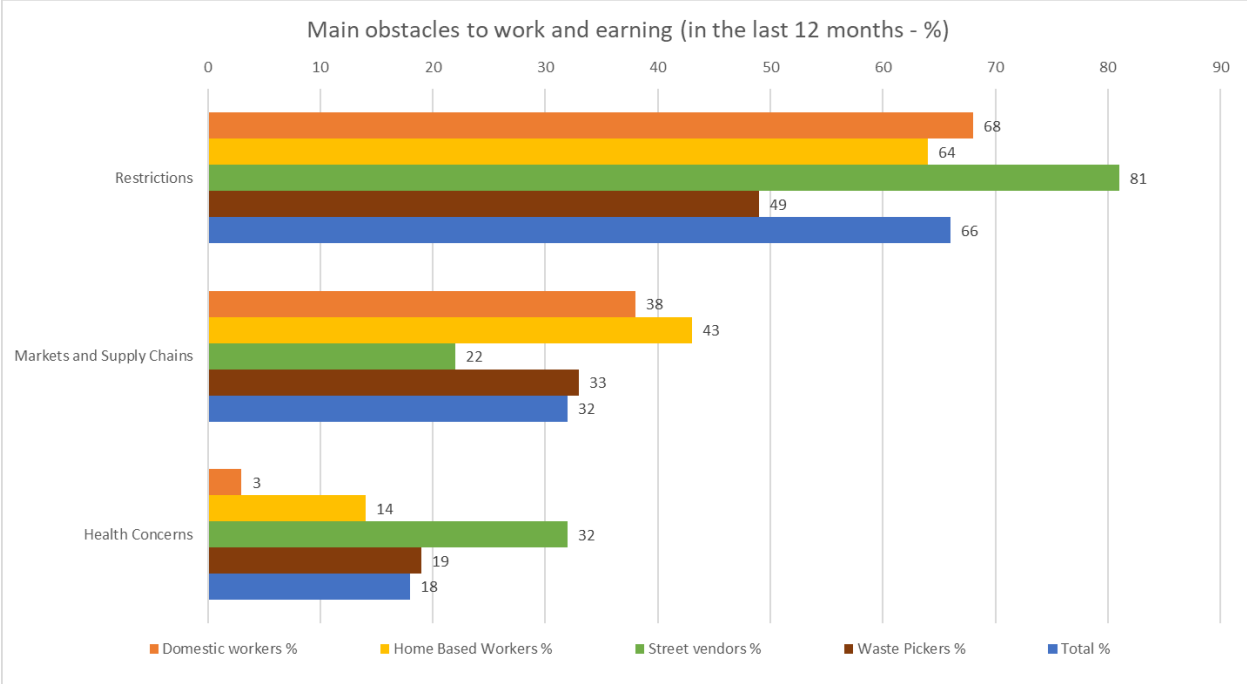
Stability of work has also not been constant. In the past 12 months, Delhi has seen varying levels of COVID-19 infection spread which has continued to affect the nature of regulations that workers have to navigate. Since mid-2020, 49 % of respondents reported that there was at least one month when they were unable to work for 10 or more days. For 28% of respondents, this was for at least 3 months or more. Additionally, a consistently high number of respondents from the women-dominated sectors of domestic work and home-based work have reported not being able to work even during the months that disease was less and restrictions relatively eased. In contrast, for the sectors of street vending and waste picking, most referred to only April-May 2021 as being the period when they were unable to work. This was the peak of the second wave in Delhi when lockdown was reimposed and public spaces were closed in the city.



**Note:** Respondents were asked to report work days in the last seven days, including days during which they worked part-time.



The main obstacles to working and earning cited by workers were: restrictions, including government restrictions, market closures and inability to access work permissions (66%), markets and supply chain issues including lack of customer demand, lack of work orders and firing (32%), and health concerns including illness and fear of illness (18%). For all sectors, government restrictions were cited as the principal obstacle to work, reflecting the comprehensive impact of Delhi’s lockdowns, even on workers who do not work in public space. Street vendors were most affected by government restrictions in the form of market closures, which were in place until the end of 2020 in most of Delhi city, and were revived again from April to August 2021 when there was a spike in COVID-19 cases. Waste pickers were most affected by restrictions in the form of sorting center closures. For domestic workers and home-based workers, market and supply chain issues were the second most common obstacle to work and earning. For domestic workers, this took the form of loss of work (employers firing workers) and lack of opportunity for new work (employers not hiring). For home-based workers, lack of or canceled work orders was the most common market or supply-chain related obstacle. Health concerns were the third most commonly reported obstacle among all sectors, and especially for the two sectors where workers have to work in public space – street vending and waste picking.



*“Our work has been badly impacted. We used to earn enough to sustain our family without even taking any loan but now the situation has changed. We have to think twice before spending a single penny. We hope our work starts again as usual.” - Male street vendor*

*“Did the government ever help waste pickers? They used police to scatter us, book us in fake theft and concocted charges. They used police forces to harass and confiscate our stuff.”- Male waste picker.*

**Earnings<sup>7</sup>**

For reporting on earnings, the measure used in this section is the median rather than the average. This is because there is high heterogeneity of earnings (even among workers in the same sector). In this context, median earnings are more representative of the sample, as they are less sensitive to extreme values (both high and low).

Total median earnings (across the four sectors) have not bounced back to pre-COVID-19 levels though there is significant improvement since 2020. In both the peak of the first lockdown in April 2020 and in mid-2020, workers had zero earnings on median. A year later, in mid-2021, median earnings have risen to up to 57% of the pre-COVID-19 median. However, it has to be noted that, even before the pandemic, informal workers in the four surveyed sectors were generally earning

<sup>7</sup> All earnings data include R2 respondents who have stopped working entirely and/or respondents who were not working in the previous month, whose days of work and earnings are set to 0. All earnings data are reported as gross earnings and do not account for costs of purchasing stocks or other inputs. Earnings data includes only what individuals earn from their primary occupation, not from other sources.



below the prescribed minimum wages.<sup>8</sup> Not being able to earn even pre-pandemic amounts now is made significantly more distressing by inflation-driven *skyrocketing prices*<sup>9</sup> of essential goods which have resulted in a rise in the *cost of living*.<sup>10</sup>

*“Everything is expensive now...just look at the rates of petrol and diesel and we need gas to run the kitchen...those expenses are also increasing...and our per piece rate is reducing....we’re working so hard, but our earnings are reducing...”* – Female home-based worker

	% of pre-pandemic <sup>11</sup> median earnings, in 2021
Domestic Workers	25%
Home-Based Workers	0
Street Vendors	100%
Waste Pickers	72%
Total	57%

Even pre-COVID-19, home-based work was the lowest earning sector. Two years into the pandemic, livelihood loss has also been highest for this sector. 57% of home-based workers still report zero earnings in mid 2021, only a slight improvement from mid-2020 when 76% had reported zero earnings. This shows that for the vast majority of our sample of home-based workers, there has been no recovery at all. It is noteworthy that this is the case despite the sample being drawn exclusively from the membership of SEWA Delhi Union who have been proactively working to reinstate work orders and open up new opportunities for home-based workers such as mask-making. Even for those who get work from time to time, home-based workers reported that they are working fewer days in a week, and piece rates remain low due to the slump in both local and global markets.

Domestic work was the second lowest earning sector pre-COVID-19 and here too, earnings have taken a sharp fall during the pandemic. As reported in our findings from Round 1, fewer than half of the domestic workers surveyed had been able to restart work by mid-2020 when the first lockdown restrictions had been eased. In mid-2021, 63% of domestic workers are now back at work and earnings have begun to recover, albeit marginally: median income reported by women workers in this sector in mid-2021 is a quarter of what they were earning in February 2020. Workers cited many reasons for this loss of earnings, including fall in average number of work days

<sup>8</sup> The minimum wage rates are notified by the Government of Delhi and revised periodically. The recent notifications including the currently prevailing rates can be found here: <https://labour.delhi.gov.in/content/current-minimum-wage-rate>. Even pre-pandemic, the average earnings of informal workers surveyed in Round 1 were below INR 10,000, which was lower than the established wage rate for “unskilled” workers at the time.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Rising prices are singeing Covid-battered India, Madame Finance Minister’. (29th May, 2021). New Indian Express. Available at <https://www.newindianexpress.com/business/2021/may/29/rising-prices-are-singeing-covid-battered-indiamadame-finance-minister-2309150.html>

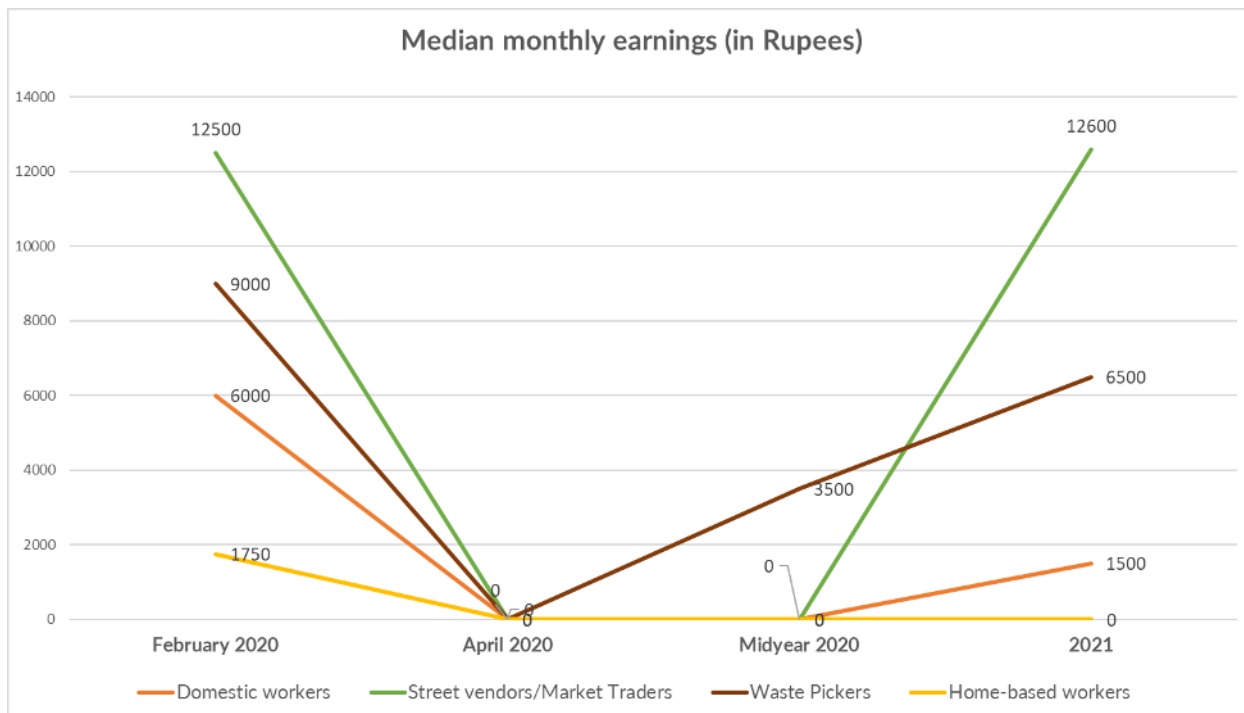
<sup>10</sup> Singh, RK et al. (9th June, 2021). ‘Amid pandemic, spike in prices of essential items makes life difficult for common people’. India Today. Available at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pandemic-spike-prices-essential-items-difficult-common-people-1812561-2021-06-09>

<sup>11</sup> February 2020

per week and loss in number of employing households for each worker. Further, workers also mentioned significant loss in bargaining power as employers now ask for more work for less pay as they know that there are more people who are desperately searching for work and would agree to lower rates. As a domestic worker leader from SEWA said, *“As we’ve been working for so long, we know the market rate...and those who are new aren’t aware...and they don’t even ask...they work with less money...so if the employers are getting their work done in a lesser amount why would they keep us?”*

Waste pickers are working fewer days per week on average, and earning less than before the pandemic. In mid-2021, the median income reported among waste pickers is nearly three-quarters of what they were earning before the pandemic. Further, in interviews, workers pointed out that earnings have fallen despite a rise in prices for the waste materials they collect in 2021 (which had fallen in 2020), as they are now facing many more new constraints to accessing waste than they used to before. The primary constraint is lack of space for them to do sorting and segregation, which results in loss of valuable materials which were earlier sold to junk dealers. Restrictions on accessing sorting space are imposed by both private residents’ welfare associations, who do not allow waste pickers to sort within the colonies after they do door to door collection, and by municipalities which have closed down many public sorting facilities during the pandemic to instead contract out service provisioning to private companies.

Street vendors were the highest earning sector before the crisis and faced a severe loss in earnings with the institution of lockdown restrictions. Larger commercial areas as well as neighborhood weekly markets remained closed even after restrictions eased in mid-2020, resulting in zero median earnings for the sector. In the second round of survey in mid-2021, the median income for the sector is back to pre-COVID-19 levels. It must be noted, however, that the survey happened in September 2021 in Delhi wherein the number of COVID-19 cases in the city was extremely low and hence all markets were allowed to operate at full capacity. This is also a festive season in Delhi when typically markets see an uptick in demand. This data was further nuanced by field workers and MBO partners who explained that even though the earnings in September were at pre-pandemic levels, street vendors have faced a great deal of uncertainty and volatility since 2020 because of the repeated restrictions on movements and market closures whenever the rate of infection has increased in the city. Further, many workers reported lower customer demand, owing to closure of tourist attractions, public transport points and other major hubs. This has affected vendors in terms of having to work longer hours to earn the same amount. The input cost has also increased due to inflation, with food vendors in particular affected by the rise in gas prices, for instance.



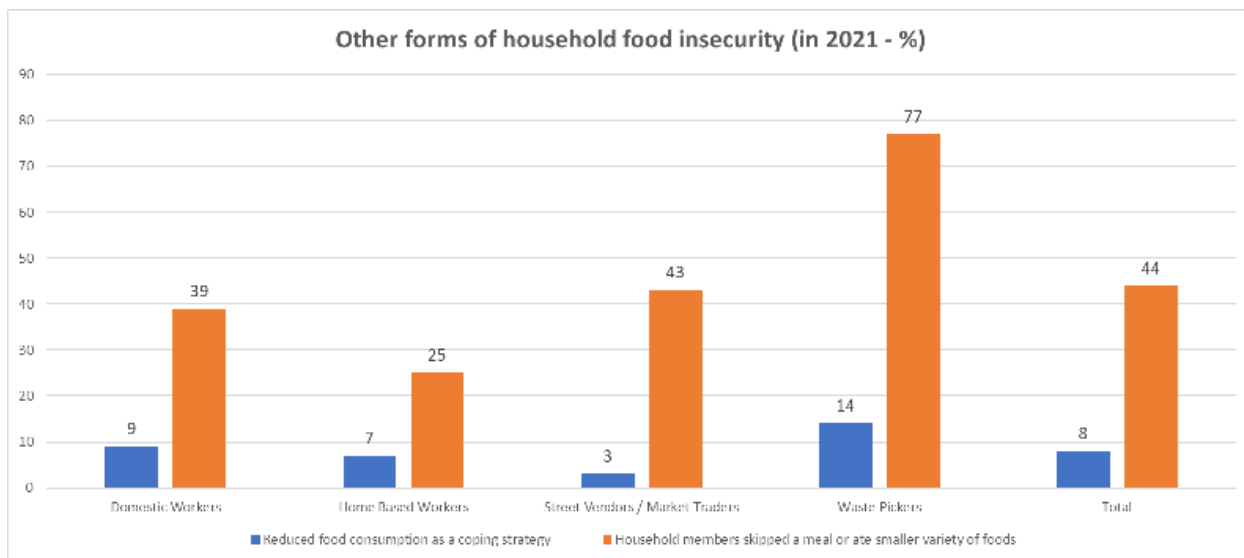
The loss in earnings also has a stark gendered dimension. As seen in the graph above, the lowest earning sectors even before the pandemic were home-based work and domestic work. These are women-dominated sectors and the all-female sample in our survey are recording the lowest level of earnings even in mid-2021. Even within the waste and street vending sectors, where the sample contained both genders, women were earning less than men in February 2020, and this gap has now increased triple-fold. In mid-2021, while monthly earnings of male waste pickers are at par with pre-pandemic levels, earnings of women in the sector are not. As most women waste pickers in Delhi work as an extension of their family’s waste work or are employed by private junk dealers in small establishments, this points to an uneven recovery of the sector. Similarly, female vendors who were earning less than male vendors even before the pandemic, are still faring worse and are recording a higher loss in monthly median income than their male counterparts.

Loss of income is also reflected at the household level. If we take household monthly income, 70% of workers still report less in 2021, as compared to pre-COVID-19. Generally, other family members too tend to be in the same or other informal sector themselves, which have all been affected by the crisis. There have also been large-scale layoffs as local businesses and other enterprises reel from the crisis. Sectorally, the loss in household income has been experienced most acutely by home-based workers (81%).

## Food Security

The loss of work and earnings among informal workers in Delhi has manifested for many in the form of food insecurity. Even in mid-year 2021, 29% of all workers reported adult hunger in their households in the previous month. 25% of respondents with children also said that children had to go hungry. More than two in five (44%) respondents said that they or other household members had skipped a meal in the last month or eaten a smaller variety of foods than they would have liked. This is a particularly distressing finding given that the majority of workers have reported getting food assistance from governments and civil society in Delhi, as discussed in the section

on relief. Typically, such relief was only provided during extreme stress periods such as when lockdowns were imposed. However, given that recovery has not been consistent, informal workers are evidently in need of food relief to be sustained on a regular and long-term basis.



*“With no earning, we are finding it very difficult to sustain the family. Children have to remain hungry. We have to fetch food from different places, we do not know for how many days we will be able to procure food from outside.” - Female waste picker*

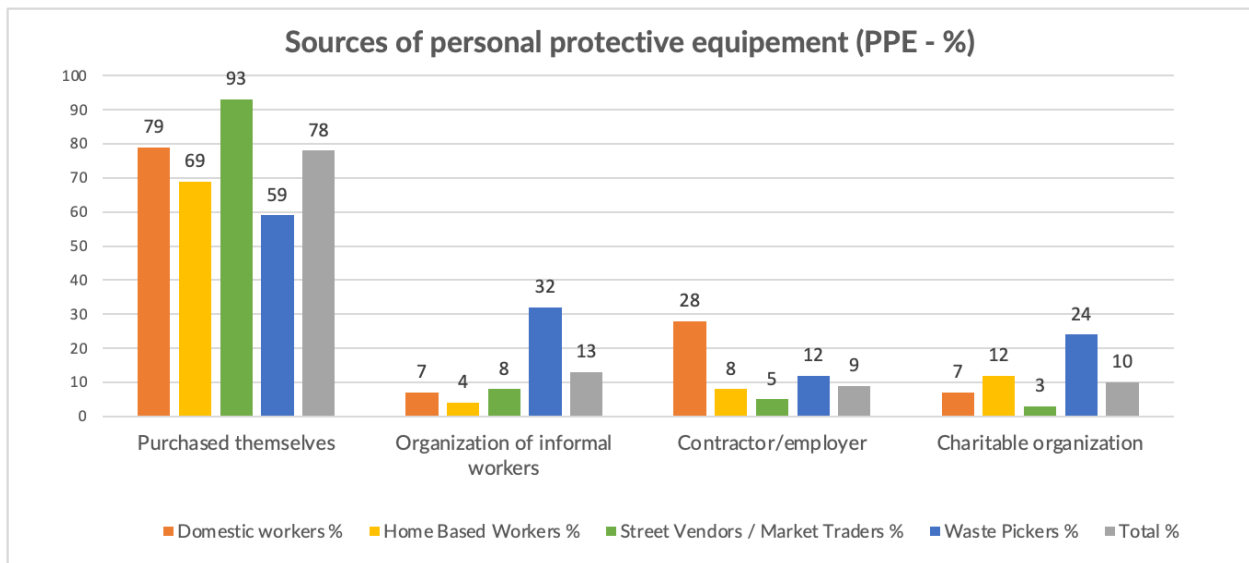
## Health and Safety

Delhi has been one of the worst-hit cities in India in terms of high rate of COVID-19 cases and deaths, including a particularly harsh second wave in April-May 2021. However, in our survey in September 2021, only 7% of respondents said that they or a household member had received positive COVID-19 test results in the last 12 months, and only 5% said they needed to take days off of work to care for themselves or a family member due to COVID-19. This data is presented with the caveat that it is likely to be under-reporting due to the fear and stigma associated with the disease. Many workers also testified that COVID-19 tests were often inaccessible to them due to high cost of testing, unavailability during peak infection periods and fear of going to crowded hospitals.

In mid-2021, among respondents who were working during the previous month, 94% reported using personal protective equipment (PPE). PPE use was least for home-based workers (73%), possibly owing to their place of work being their own homes. Four in five (79%) respondents purchased PPE themselves, 18% received PPE from their MBO or a charitable organization, and only 10% received it from their employers. Even domestic workers who work in their employers' homes did not receive much support in this, with only a quarter (28%) of respondents reporting that their employers provided them with PPE.

"I wore a mask, kept a handwash with me and a sanitizer. I took all the safety measures to ensure that there's no trouble or that I don't get sick. Even when people came to the shop, I stood far away from them and put up a rope outside for customers to know that they should maintain some distance."  
 - Female street vendor

"I spend at least INR 500-600 on these things in a month- for masks, sanitizer, soaps. So if I am earning INR 8000, I have to save 1000 to buy all of this, because it is important for survival."  
 - Female domestic worker



\* Respondents could select more than one response

India began COVID-19 vaccinations on 16<sup>th</sup> January, 2021 in a phased manner, prioritizing health workers and the elderly population above 45 years of age. From May 1<sup>st</sup> onwards, the drive was opened for any person above the age of 18. In the beginning, informal workers struggled to get vaccinated due to the unavailability of free doses at government centres, high prices in private hospitals and also the technological barrier caused by the requirement of prior registration on a website. Over time, however, more government walk-in centres were opened up and, in our survey, 93% of respondents had either received at least one vaccine dose or were scheduled to do so in the next four weeks. It is to be noted however that this sample is drawn from workers who are associated with strong MBOs which have played a critical role in raising awareness about vaccinations and facilitating workers to get them. However, there have been several reports showing regional, gender and social disparities in vaccinations,<sup>12</sup> and in fact the National Capital Region where Delhi is located has a lower rate of vaccination for women compared to men.

<sup>12</sup> Esteves, LA & Iqbal, N. (3rd November, 2021) "1 Billion Vaccine Doses, But Women, Tribals Lag". India Spend. Available on: <https://www.indiaspend.com/covid-19/1-billion-vaccine-doses-but-women-tribals-lag-785262>

In the open-ended questions and the qualitative interviews, many workers expressed the fear and distress they faced due to the disease, which still made them quite anxious.

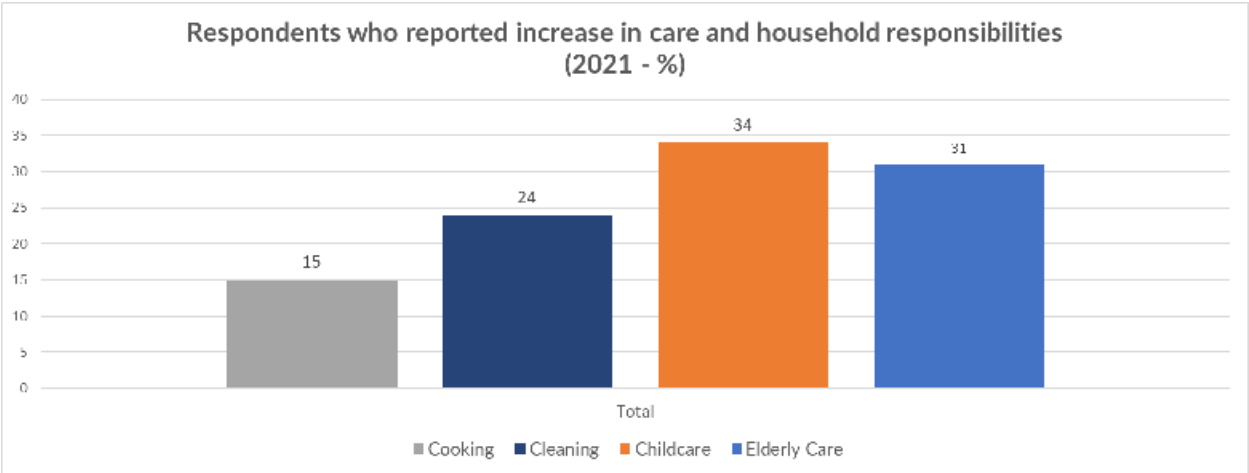
*“Although no one succumbed to COVID-19 in the family, the fear of getting positive was huge and as a result we had to live in continuous fear. The situation this year was worse than last year and for a long time we had to leave our work. Also police was imposing heavy fines on not wearing a mask, we were not able to afford a mask initially so affording a fine was impossible.” - Waste picker*

*“The main concern was what would happen to my family if I’m affected with COVID-19 as I have to meet the sub-contractors and collect the material for work as it’s airborne disease it could spread easily and they say the virus will be alive for more than an hour in the surface, what if the person who handled the piece (garment) in the factory was affected, and by working on the same piece I will also get infected so it was a bit of scary to work on the piece. But now as I ‘m vaccinated the fear is reduced.” - Home-based worker*

## Household Stress

### Care and Other Household Responsibilities

Along with the impact on health and livelihood, the COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in a crisis of care. In our survey, 33% of workers with children reported an increase in time spent on child care and 31% of workers with elderly household members reported an increase in time spent on their care. Many respondents also reported an increase in time spent on cooking (14%) and cleaning (24%) in the previous month when compared to February 2020. Over half the respondents (55%) also reported that these responsibilities prevented them from going to work, or made work more difficult compared to February 2020, before the pandemic. Far more women (62%) reported this compared to men (38%). More than two in five (43%) respondents reported that care responsibilities prevented them from working the same number of hours compared to February 2020, before the pandemic (50% of women and 25% of men).



\*Sample includes only those respondents who reported children and/or elderly living in their households. Sample excludes domestic workers who live in their employers’ homes.

## Household Concerns and Tensions

As informal workers are living with reduced incomes, insecurity of livelihood, persistent hunger and constraints imposed due to government regulations, this has created an atmosphere of stress and tension in the household in many different ways. In several instances, both workers and/or their spouses have lost jobs which has jolted the stability of households which were surviving paycheck to paycheck even before the crisis. A particular point of stress mentioned by many workers is inability to pay rent and hence the anxiety about losing their place of living.

Having to live with bare survival needs and making coping choices such as less food for the children or compromising on their education were shared to be other major sources of anxiety. The loss of earnings has made it difficult to pay school fees, leading to many parents having to either take children out of higher-quality private schools to enroll in government schools, or have them drop out altogether. Many also shared the difficulty of acquiring mobile phones with internet access to enable online classes, even after which they are unsure of how much the children are able to learn without proper guidance.

Fear about the disease was also strong among workers even as they continuously had to risk exposing themselves in order to survive. In particular, waste pickers and domestic workers shared many stories of stress, whether it be having to deal with contaminated waste materials or being called to work by employers who did not disclose being infected with the virus. Further, they were also at the receiving end of heightened stigma as carriers of disease.

Adding to all of this was workers' anxiety about the future and sense of isolation from the government. There is growing apathy and lack of faith in the state machinery as workers reported that rather than support, they are faced with harassment and evictions as they try to earn their livelihood.

*"The house rent has been pending since March 2020...I finished paying it for 8 months...I've to also pay the current month's rent from my earnings...now I still have a backlog of 6 months of house rent..."*  
- Female home-based worker

*"My husband suffered a heart attack due to Covid-19 and now he is not able to work. I am the only earning member now and I have also dropped my children out of school."* - Female domestic worker

*"We had to drop our son out of the private school to admit him into the government school. We have not paid the rent either."* - Female home-based worker

*"My daughter is in a government school, but for my son who is in a private school, I have yet to pay this entire year's fees. So they've stopped his online class and now the school has stopped calling us. Even if I have to get a leaving certificate, I have to finish paying off the fees. Because of this, my son has lost out on education and wasted the entire year."* - Female street vendor

## Relief Measures

The pandemic came down on the informal workers of Delhi as a triple crisis – of health, livelihood and care. Government actions were calculated to prevent disease and relied on harsh measures without much thought to support services which were required to enable people to cope. These measures were blind to the livelihood needs of the informal workers. In Delhi, like in other big cities throughout India, this led to the large-scale exodus of migrant workers, many of whom began to walk thousands of miles back to their villages.

The government did not launch any cash grant scheme specifically for informal workers in any of the four sectors covered by this study. Only a few women workers, who had bank accounts under the Jan Dhan financial inclusion programme, reported receiving Rs. 500 per month for the three months of April, May and June 2020.

The most significant form of government relief was in the form of food support, but the efficacy of this has also varied across time from the beginning of the crisis. In the second round of our survey, 65% of respondents reported receiving government food support in the last 12 months as opposed to around 73% of workers in the first round of survey in 2020. The extended food assistance programmes which were begun during the first phase of lockdown in 2020 – including rations at free or subsidized rates for ration cardholders, E-coupon scheme for migrants to avail rations on the basis of Aadhar card, and cooked food distribution through government schools – were *not rolled-out to the same extent*<sup>13</sup> during the second wave of the disease and lockdown in Delhi in April-May 2021. Relief from workers' own organizations and civil society were also less than in the previous year owing to a shortage of resources and diversion of what was available towards the procurement of urgent medical supplies like oxygen, hospital beds and critical medicines which were in short supply. However, responses to the open-ended question to workers on how their MBOs have supported them through the crisis, revealed that many workers received critical material support in the form of food rations for many months during the past year. Workers' organizations were also critical in last-mile delivery of state schemes by ensuring identification of beneficiaries, documentation and registrations where required, and filling in key gaps in information dissemination.

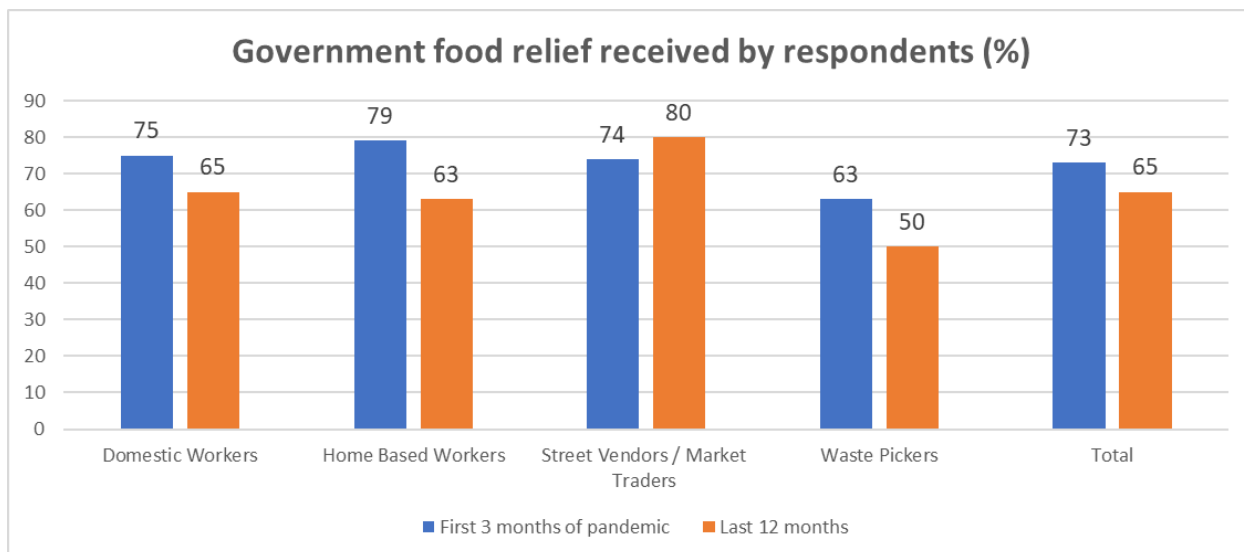
*“Our street vendors are not from here...they come from other places, they don't even have a ration card....the Government said that only if they have proof of living in Delhi, will they be eligible for ration. Our organization, through all the pradhans (leaders) of the markets, gave ration to every person in need...not once, but thrice...we helped them in signing up for vaccinations...till now we're trying to set up vaccination centres.”* – Street vendor leader, Janpahal

*“Abkar bhai really helped me with grocery items, including milk for kids and that's absolutely free of cost. During Covid time, he was like a savior to us. Him and the Basti Suraksha Manch team started a school (tuition) from 9am to 12 o'clock for all the children in our community.”* – Male waste picker

*“BVD helped me with food ration and grocery items. They also gave me a mobile for my daughter who is studying in 9th standard so that she can continue her education.”* – Female domestic worker

<sup>13</sup> Kunduri, Eesha et al. (6th June, 2021) “Widening the Food Security Net: Lessons From Delhi's 2020 Lockdown”. The Wire. Available on: <https://thewire.in/rights/delhi-covid-19-lockdown-food-security-migrants>





More than one in ten (13%) respondents also reported receiving a government loan. In May 2020, the Central government announced a financial relief scheme for street vendors. Under the PM SVANidhi scheme, a vendor is eligible for a one-time loan of INR 10,000. However, slow rollout, vendors needing certificates for proof and issues with banks has meant that not all vendors have been able to take advantage of this. Additionally, with large debt burdens and a loss of savings, this *amount has proven to be insufficient*<sup>14</sup> to be able to resume work and was often used for consumption needs.

Less than half (46%) of respondents reported that they had rent, utilities, tuition or loans canceled, forgiven or deferred. As many as 27% of all workers said they had deferred rent payments, and this was particularly high for domestic workers (54%) and home-based workers (41%). It has to be noted that none of this was mandated by the government, but rather was due to the informal social networks and arrangements between landlords and tenants.

*“It was difficult to pay rent because we didn’t have any work...so some of the landlords only asked us for half the rent...some didn’t take the electricity bill. We only organized this because many sisters would complain about this issue, that they didn’t have money to pay the rent, so we collectively went to the landlords’ house and spoke to them. We told them to understand that without work, women are not able to pay them the rent. We assured that if they can take part of the money now, when the women get work, they will pay the rest.”*

– Domestic worker leader, SEWA

<sup>14</sup> Majithia, AS. (2021) 'With Impact of Lockdown Yet to Wear Off, Delhi Street Vendors' Travails Persist'. The Wire. Available on - <https://thewire.in/labour/as-the-impact-of-lockdown-yet-to-wear-off-delhi-street-vendors-travails-persist>

## Adaptation and Coping Strategies

As noted above, informal workers have received very little support from the government or any other formal establishment. Given the ongoing impact on work and earnings, however, workers have had to undertake a range of coping measures to meet their basic needs. Nine in ten (91%) respondents in our survey reported having taken one or more coping strategies to help their households survive the crisis, most significantly incurring debt and drawing down savings.

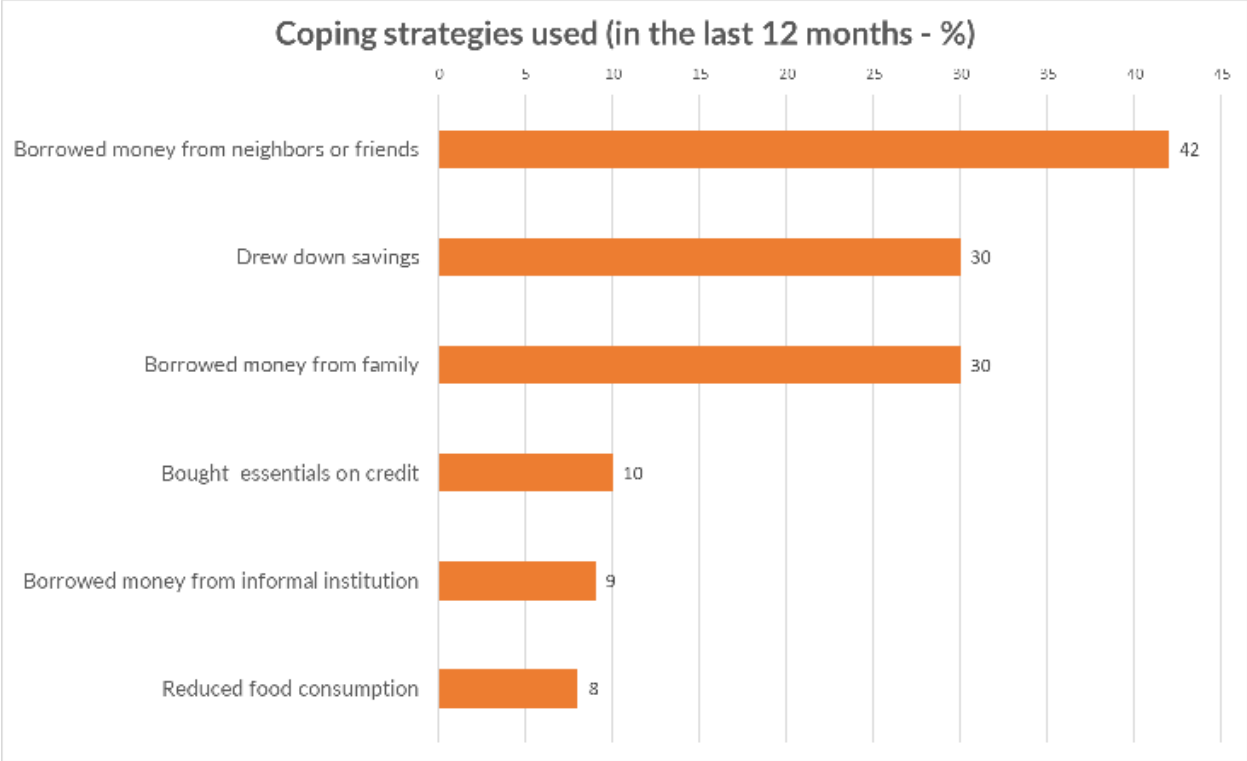
In total, 73% of workers had to borrow money from one or source or another. A large part of this was from family (29%) or friends and neighbours (42%). Among those who took out loans over the last 12 months, the average amount of outstanding debt is around INR 12,000. While absolute comparisons are not possible, it should be mentioned that, even in pre-COVID-19 times, average monthly earnings were below this, at only INR 9000. Additionally, many workers also reported having to borrow much larger sums of money ranging between INR50,000 and INR150,000 to meet various contingencies like medical bills and expenses on weddings.

Almost one-third (30%) of workers also said they had to dip into their savings. However, among those who drew down from their savings since the onset of the pandemic, 90% said they had no ability to replace the savings. This means that the long-term vulnerability of workers and their families has increased manifold two years into the crisis.

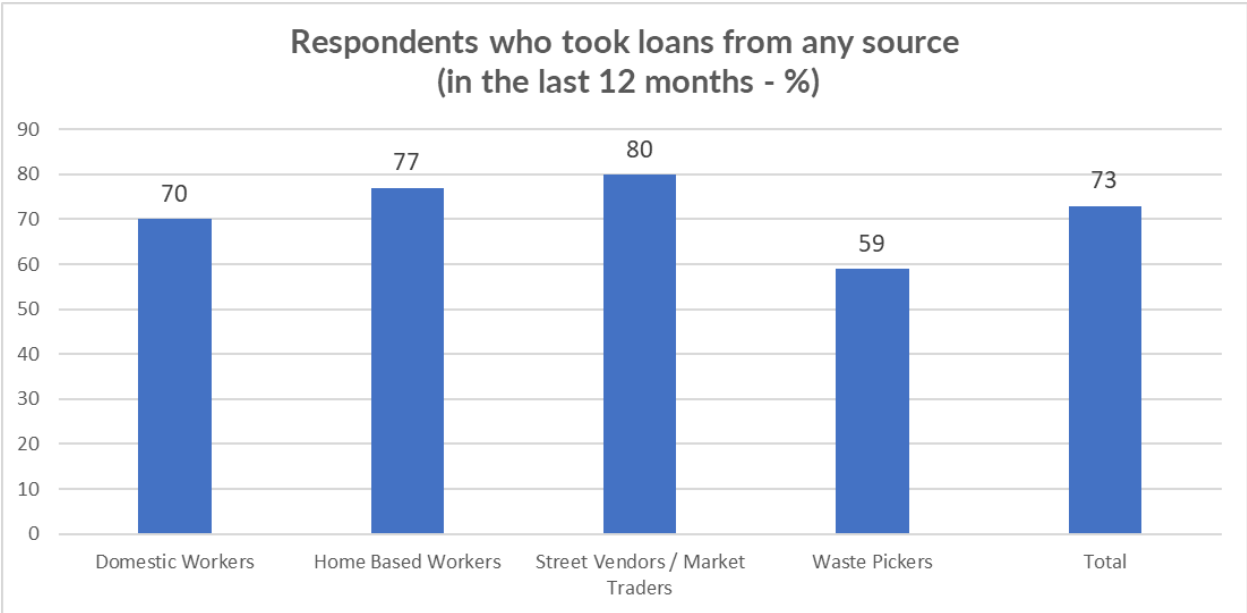
*"It was really very hard for me, I used my entire savings and borrowed 50000 from my brother and I still have to pay back the balance amount of 30000. I can't continue with this profession for my entire life; hence I was looking to start something else. However this Covid-19 has changed everything for the worse." – Male waste picker*

*"Our children had to sleep hungry due to COVID-19. We had to take loans to even incur basic daily expenses, now we are not able to pay back those loans. Where will we pay back the loans as we do not have any work now." – Male street vendor*

*"There is no work and our landlord did not give us a relief on rent which we were unable to pay. Because of the non-payment of rent we were ousted and we had to change our house." – Female home-based worker*



\* Respondents could select more than one response



## Recovery and Beyond: Informal Worker Needs and Demands



As mentioned previously, informal workers have received little support from the government to cope with the multiple impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. As one male waste picker poignantly said, *“What will I ask from the government? What are they doing? If the government really wants, they can help us. But they won't because there is no will”*.

Despite the fact that the four sectors of work covered under the survey are very significant sources of employment and constitute essential work of various forms, there has been little recognition of their contributions and consequently no specific provisions for support. In terms of future recovery, support to resume livelihoods was expressed to be the most important need by workers, as the ability to earn regularly would be the only panacea for all the other problems that they are facing. Even in mid-2021, a large number of workers surveyed reported the need for immediate material support. In this, workers mentioned long-term sustained public provisioning of food supplies as well as cash relief to support basic needs of the households. Since the beginning of the ongoing triple crisis of health, work and care, informal workers, their organizations and allies have consistently raised the following key demands. Movement towards meeting these recommendations are the urgent need of the hour.

## Recognition and regulation:

- Bring all informal workers, including those who work in homes and informal spaces, under the ambit of national labour laws and regulations which mandate the right to decent work and pay.
- Extend and facilitate access to social security, especially child care and health insurance, for all informal workers – step up awareness raising and registrations and ease access requirements. Particular attention must be paid to facilitate ease of access for migrant workers who are unable to avail of even existing provisions due to lack of portability of schemes.
- The E-Shram registration process that began in August 2021 is a laudable first step, but there continues to be many issues with regard to pace of registrations and documentation required. The central and state governments have to take a more proactive role in the roll-out of this programme and also clearly link cash support, social security benefits and other schemes which workers can avail immediately.

*“We want our profession to be recognized to revive our sector.” – Male street vendor*

*“We just want to have permanent work and an adequate wage. Also if we can be provided ration for a bit longer, this will help too.” – Female domestic worker*

*“We wish our ration card and Aadhar card could be prepared. We are still not able to get ration because of this.” – Female home-based worker*

## Enable livelihood opportunities:

- Ensure that income security includes both work security and social security. Informal workers who faced massive loss of livelihood cannot be denied income security in COVID-19 times.
- Implement proactive government measures to create jobs and induce employment-intensive economic development through minimum employment guarantees and laying of basic minimum wage provisions.
- Support informal workers to restart livelihoods:
  - Waste pickers' access to waste has to be ensured by providing decentralized spaces for sorting and segregations, and by preventing capture by private companies.
  - Street vendors need capital to restart their livelihood, and this should be in the form of cash support rather than a loan which puts them further in debt. Street vendors also have to be protected against evictions, harassment by authorities and closure of vending spaces. Public health measures to curb disease spread must not be put entirely on workers, but rather local governments must partner with vendors to ensure social distancing and safe market access for all.
  - Ensure employers' responsibility towards domestic workers which includes minimum wage guarantees, protocols to prevent arbitrary hire and fire, providing protective gear and health support.
  - Supply chain relief contributions for homeworkers and revival of work orders at fixed rates of pay which match national standards for work.

*"We want some work and the government should ensure that our salary is paid on time. I also want to start my own work of stitching."* – Female domestic worker

*"We are the government's responsibility. There is such a huge price hike and our earnings have reduced to zero. We do not manage to get enough out of our labour. Government should work to increase our earnings. Also, they should arrange for food rations, till things get better."* – Male waste picker

*"Companies have no idea or expertise on how to manage the waste, they pay waste pickers low wages to do the same work they have been doing before. So why should companies be brought into this process? We are ok if the government gives us some guidelines and we will be happy to follow those. However, the government should take us on board before deciding things unilaterally by completely ignoring the waste picker community."* – Male waste picker

*"I got the PM SvaNidhi loan, but this was not helpful as it was a very small amount. I had to use it for daily expenses, and the work is not even enough to be able to pay back the interest."* – Male street vendor

*"We should earn proper wages, get enough leaves. If we get sick, we should not lose any money. That's our ask from the government."* – Female domestic worker

*"We just want regular work, we don't get work from subcontractors regularly...sometimes it comes, sometimes we're just sitting...And we need a rate that is proportional to our work...it shouldn't be the same rate for a big and a small piece...now after Covid, they are expecting everything to be done for a very low rate."* – Female home-based worker

#### **Minimize health risks:**

- Ensure access to water and sanitation facilities at both homes and informal worksites, as well as increased access to these in public places.
- Ensure provision of personal protective equipment and sanitizers to informal workers who are providing essential services that aid public health through their work. The cost burden of this should not fall on workers.
- Ensure health and insurance schemes for informal workers.
- Provide access to quality community testing and quarantine centers that are affordable and in proximity.

#### **Do no harm:**

- Ensure there is no eviction of street vendors as is mandated by the Street Vendor Act, 2014.
- Stop harassment of waste pickers and street vendors by police and municipal officials.
- Stop unjust rules and regulations by Resident Welfare Associations which limit domestic workers' right to work.

### Nothing for us without us:

- Involve informal workers and their organizations as key stakeholders in all decision making that impacts their work.
- Include MBOs and civil society in government relief and recovery programmes to ensure last mile delivery.

### Ensure decent living and working conditions for informal workers through inclusive city planning and policies:

- Recognize and support informal livelihoods in the city by promoting labour-intensive growth and ensuring access to safe and secure workspaces, including in public space, with basic services.
- Formal space allocations for waste work at decentralized levels, recognition of vending spaces, community work centers, etc.
- Provide decent housing and rent moratorium for informal workers in the city.
- Ensure access to safe and quality public transport.

*"We want a moratorium on the house rent and also some kind of cash support. "*

- Female domestic worker

*"The government should allow us to do our job without harassment and intimidation. This is the minimum I expect from them. If I am able to work, I can earn at least enough to feed my family." -*

Male waste picker

**COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy** is a collaboration between the global network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and local partner organizations representing informal workers in 12 cities: Accra, Ghana; Ahmedabad, India; Bangkok, Thailand; Dakar, Senegal; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Delhi, India; Durban, South Africa; Lima, Peru; Mexico City, Mexico; New York City, USA; Pleven, Bulgaria; and Tiruppur, India, with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC/CRDI), Canada. The mixed-methods longitudinal study includes survey questionnaires of informal workers and semi-structured interviews with informal worker leaders and other key informants, all conducted by phone. For more information, visit [wiego.org/COVID-19-Global-Impact-Study](http://wiego.org/COVID-19-Global-Impact-Study).

**Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)** is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies. Visit [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org).

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