

Domestic Workers During the COVID-19 Crisis: Pathways of Impact, Recovery and Resilience in Six Cities



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Cover Photograph: Raquel Martínez, 48, has been working as a domestic worker in Mexico City for 25 years. During the pandemic, she took care of her husband, who had a chronic disease, and her workload as a domestic worker increased. Source: César Parra

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Domestic workers' ability to work and earn an income were negatively impacted throughout the pandemic and particularly at the onset of the study in April 2020.

The inability to work and earnings recovery was more pronounced for live-out domestic workers compared to live-in domestic workers. Live-out domestic workers in five of six study cities (Ahmedabad, Bangkok, Delhi, Lima and Pleven) were reporting median earnings of zero or near zero in 2020. By mid-2021, earnings recovery of live-in domestic workers reached the pre-COVID-19 level and the earnings recovery of live-out domestic workers was 88 per cent of the pre-COVID-19 level.

Domestic workers across the six cities reported increased precarity in their working conditions due to reduced bargaining power, increased competition in the sector, and an increase in workload.

Domestic workers confronted occupational health risks with strong reports of mental health strains two years into the pandemic. By mid-2021, 46 per cent of domestic workers reported health concerns as the second-greatest obstacle to working. In cities with stronger second COVID-19 waves in 2021, reports of exposure to COVID-19 among domestic workers were also higher.

Only one-third of domestic workers reported receiving cash and/or food relief from the government in the first three months of the pandemic and by mid-2021. Domestic workers reported being excluded from government relief, often resulting from the fact that their salaries were too low and work arrangements too unstable to benefit from social security, but too high to benefit from relief.

Domestic worker organizations were quick to respond to their members' needs and shift their organizational and communication strategies. Organizations provided a range of support that included immediate material relief at the onset of the pandemic to long-standing emotional and legal support as the pandemic endured.

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Introduction

Domestic workers provide essential direct and indirect care services for households globally, and yet they experience some of the most vulnerable situations. They earn a fraction of the monthly wages of formal employees, and only one in five domestic workers is covered by employment-related social security (ILO 2021). Studies show that domestic workers are less likely to work within the range of normal weekly hours compared to other employees and often face harassment (Osei-Boateng 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic only worsened domestic workers' socio-economic disadvantages. Bereft of social safety nets, the sting of job losses during the pandemic and resulting income losses threatened to be especially painful to domestic workers. Those who remained employed were required to be in others' homes, and often multiple homes, exposing them to heightened risks of catching the virus, often without access to health care.

This report explores how the pandemic has exposed and worsened domestic workers' legal, economic and social plight. It looks at how COVID-19 accentuated the mismatch between the necessity for domestic workers' labour to sustain households and their precarious working and living conditions.

Findings are presented from six cities where domestic workers were surveyed and interviewed: Ahmedabad and Delhi, India; Bangkok, Thailand; Lima, Peru; Mexico City, Mexico, and Pleven, Bulgaria.

The findings are based on the COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy study, a WIEGO-led longitudinal study that assessed the multidimensional impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on specific groups of informal workers and their households during subsequent waves of the pandemic and associated restrictions. Through a survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews, Round 1 assessed the impact of the crisis in April 2020 and mid-2020 compared to February 2020 (the pre-COVID-19 period). Round 2 was conducted in mid-2021 to assess how workers were experiencing COVID-19 resurgences and ongoing economic strains, and to what extent (if any) they had recovered.

The data provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the degrees and pathways of impact on domestic workers, as well as the myriad forms of support provided by domestic worker organizations during the pandemic.

Across the six cities, surveys were conducted with 365 domestic workers. Of this total sample, 279 domestic workers were interviewed in both 2020 and 2021.¹ Round 2 surveys were conducted between June and August 2021 in Pleven, Mexico City, Lima and Bangkok, and, due to a severe Delta variant outbreak, between September and October 2021 in Delhi and Ahmedabad. Quantitative data analysis utilized Stata.

¹ 279 respondents were interviewed in Round 1 only and 40 were interviewed in Round 2 only. Unless otherwise noted, all findings that compare Round 1 and Round 2 data consist of unbalanced panels, meaning that they include all respondents from Round 1 and Round 2. For this reason, they are not perfect representations of changes experienced by the Round 1 sample.

The report also draws on qualitative data: 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with domestic workers and domestic worker leaders in July and August 2020 and 16 domestic workers and leaders between August and October 2021; and open-ended questions regarding worker demands in the surveys from Rounds 1 and 2. The semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions were coded and analyzed using NVivo software. For further contextual and regional insights, the report also considers findings from studies conducted by the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) on the impact of the pandemic on domestic workers in Latin America and Africa.

City	Sample Size	% Live-in	% Live-out
Pleven	55	2	98
Ahmedabad	61	5	95
Delhi	58	8	92
Mexico City	73	23	77
Lima	54	26	74
Bangkok	55	0	100
Total	356	22	78

The research was conducted in collaboration with membership-based organizations (MBOs) of workers in informal employment in each city. The sample of domestic workers in each city was designed to reflect the key characteristics of the domestic worker members of the local informal worker organizations partnering in the study: a purposive quota approach. The findings are thus indicative rather than representative of domestic workers in each city. MBOs, non-governmental organization allies and local research teams, with the support of WIEGO’s global study advisory team, conducted the surveys and in-depth interviews. A full list of the organizations and researchers is in Appendix 1.

The report first presents a brief overview of structural inequalities that have historically affected the domestic workforce and working conditions. The following sections focus on key findings from WIEGO’s [COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy study](#). The impact of the crisis on domestic workers’ ability to work and their earnings is considered, followed by a description of their employment conditions and livelihoods during the pandemic. The report then examines how domestic workers were impacted beyond the private sphere of the workplace, and the interconnected impacts of domestic workers’ access to public services, such as transportation. Domestic workers’ access and barriers to relief provided by governments and the various strategies domestic workers took to cope with their livelihood losses are described. The report then notes the comprehensive forms of support provided by local organizations of domestic workers, as well as organizing and advocacy strategies undertaken during the pandemic. It concludes with domestic workers’ common policy demands across the six cities.

Size and Nature of Domestic Work

Globally there are 75.6 million domestic workers,^{2,3} aged 15 years and older, and of which 76 per cent are women (Bonnet, Carré and Vanek 2022, p. 1). The overwhelming majority of domestic workers are in developing and emerging countries. Two regions in particular – East and South-Eastern Asia (36%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (19%) – host 55 per cent of domestic workers worldwide (Bonnet, Carré and Vanek 2022, p. 1). Estimates from the ILO (2021) highlight that 81.2 per cent of domestic workers are in informal employment, and that this trend is higher in developing and emerging countries (85%) in comparison to developed countries (62%) (Bonnet, Carré and Vanek 2022, p. 5).⁴

The size of the domestic workforce depends on several factors on both the supply and the demand side. On the supply side, factors pushing women and men into domestic work include poverty, a need to secure the livelihoods of their families, and a lack of formal employment opportunities (Anderson 2000; Blofield 2012). These factors often drive women and men to become domestic workers far from home, in urban centres in their home countries, or in other countries with the aim of earning a higher income (Parreñas 2000; Lutz 2011; Michel and Peng 2017). In this regard, domestic work forms an important source of employment among women migrant workers who represent 17.2 per cent of all domestic workers (ILO 2016). The number of migrant domestic workers is especially high in Latin America and the Caribbean, where they represent 35.3 per cent of domestic workers in the region (ILO 2015g).

On the demand side, increasing dependency ratios and lack of care policies increased the need for households to employ domestic workers to meet direct and indirect⁵ care needs (ILO 2018a). In light of demographic changes, population aging and long-term care needs, the ILO (2021) expects the demand for domestic work to grow globally.

Overall, the sector is marked by precarious work conditions, lack of social and labour protections, exposure to occupational safety and health risks, as well as violence and harassment (ILO 2021). In addition, a key variable – place of work – can compound the experiences of these vulnerabilities. Almost one-third of women domestic workers (29%) and one-quarter of men (23%) live in their employer's house (live-in), while others work part time and may serve multiple employers (live-out) (ILO 2021). In addition,

² Domestic workers are defined as: “workers of any sex employed for pay or profit, including in-kind payment, who perform work in or for a household or households to provide services mainly for consumption by the household” (ILO, 2021).

³ All numbers presented in this section result from WIEGO and ILO estimates based on microdata. They are estimated using national labour force surveys and household surveys following the statistical definition of domestic workers provided in the resolution concerning statistics on work relationships adopted at the 20th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) (ILO 2018b) and recommended in the conceptual framework for statistics on work relationships (ILO 2018i). Estimates refer to 2019 for domestic workers aged 15 and older who consider domestic work their main job.

⁴ For a comprehensive understanding of informality rates across regions, see Bonnet, Carré and Vanek, 2022.

⁵ Direct care work includes care for children, the elderly or other household members, while indirect care involves activities such as cooking and cleaning.

globally, domestic workers earn 56.4 per cent of the average monthly wages of other employees, and those working informally earn on average 37.6 per cent of the monthly wages of formal employees (ILO 2021).

Legal Framework

Historically, domestic workers have been largely excluded from national labour laws. This exclusion reflects a lack of recognition of domestic work as real work, both in legal and societal terms. Accordingly, recognition has been a key demand for domestic workers globally.

In 2011, the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), the first international legal instrument devoted to domestic work, which served to recognize the economic contribution of domestic workers and protect their labour rights. However, only 35 countries globally ratified the convention; these 35 included only two (Peru and Mexico) with cities from our study. A decade of effort and advocacy by workers' organizations and employers yielded improved coverage of domestic workers by laws and policies. When covered by law, domestic workers are either included in general labour laws, specific labour laws or subordinate regulations (ILO, 2021). Nonetheless, the effective coverage of domestic workers has been impeded by factors including institutional capacity to implement and enforce compliance, eligibility requirements, access to information, access to justice and migration status.

Sometimes countries recognize domestic workers as workers under the general labour code but exclude them from specific provisions on working time, wages, social protection, occupational safety and health measures or other provisions (ILO 2010c). ILO studies (2021) on the implementation barriers reveal that approximately 28 per cent of countries impose no limits on normal weekly hours of work, 14 per cent of countries provide no legal right to weekly rest, and 11 per cent of countries provide no legal right to paid annual leave (ILO 2021). For instance, in Thailand, in 2012, a ministerial regulation was adopted making most of the Labour Protection Act applicable to domestic workers, except for the minimum wage rules and maximum working hours per day.

Working Conditions

Even prior to the pandemic, domestic workers were facing deficient working conditions in the areas of working time, wages and social security. Only one in every five domestic workers is covered by effective employment-related social security coverage (ILO 2021).

Live-in and migrant domestic workers face especially precarious circumstances. For example, live-in domestic workers are twice as likely as live-out domestic workers to work more than 48 hours per week (Bonnet, Carré and Vanek 2022). The nature of their living and working arrangement implies that they often remain at the disposal of the household members at any time, day or night, and there is a lack of distinction between working time and periods of rest (ILO 2021). Such arrangements result in more isolation, less privacy, limited mobility and longer working hours. They are also more vulnerable to physical/sexual abuse by employers compared to live-out domestic workers (ILO 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic strongly exposed how the lack of legal recognition is heightened by limited societal recognition of domestic workers as workers with rights. In this sense,

the pandemic has served to exacerbate many existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, while revealing the essential nature of care work in households.

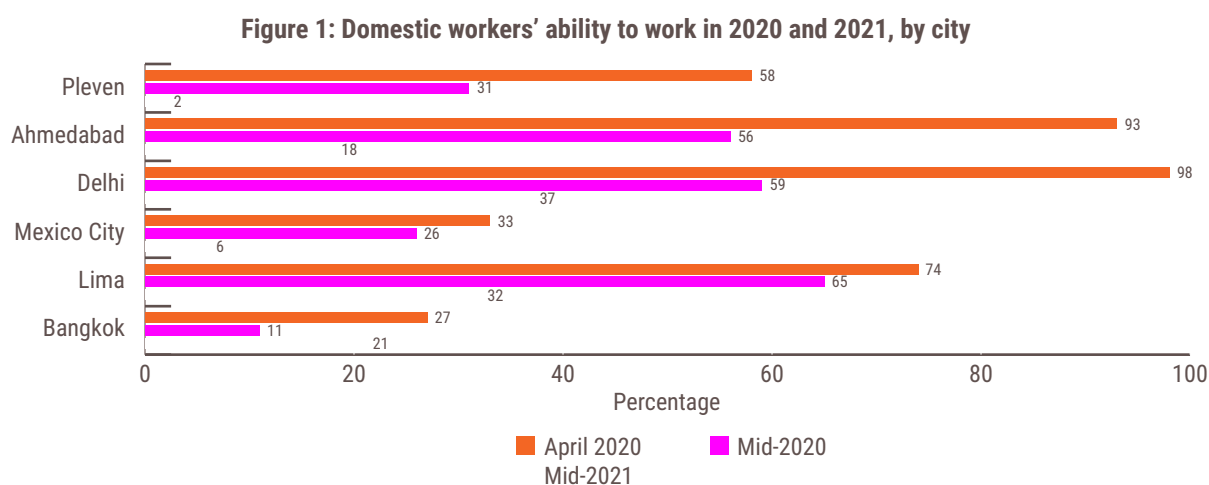
COVID-19 Impacts on Domestic Workers' Ability to Work and Their Earnings

This section considers the degree and pathways of impacts on domestic workers with regard to their ability to work and on their earnings over a two-year period. The findings reveal that domestic workers' ability to work and earnings were hard hit during the first three months of the pandemic across the six cities; and that they were still facing negative repercussions on their economic activities 18 months after the onset of the pandemic.

Figure 1 shows domestic workers' ability to work over three periods in all six cities. Round 1 study findings from 2020 reveal that government restrictions and imposed lockdowns had concrete impacts on domestic workers' ability to work in April 2020 and by mid-2020. During government-imposed city-level restrictions and lockdowns in April 2020, 63 per cent of domestic workers reported being unable to work. At this time, they were earning, at the median, only 32 per cent of their pre-COVID earnings across the cities. In Pleven, Ahmedabad, Delhi and Lima, domestic workers had zero earnings at the median, as shown in Figure 2.

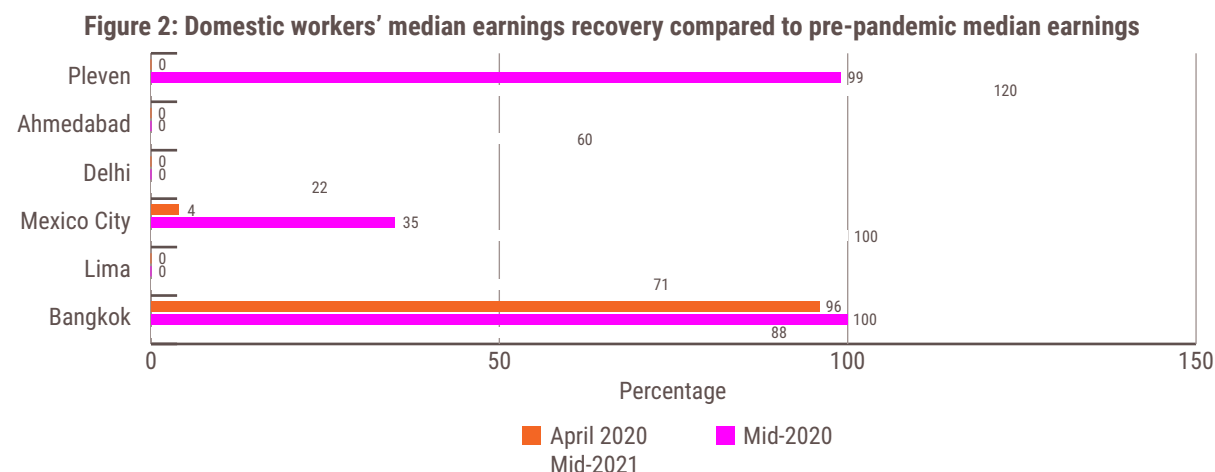
By mid-2020 – when restrictions had relatively eased – 59 per cent of domestic workers had returned to work at least partially, though at much reduced hours. However, in Ahmedabad, Delhi and Lima, the majority of domestic workers were still unable to work by mid-2020 (Figure 1). This is largely due to the severity of the government-imposed restrictions and lockdowns in both India and Peru. In India, lockdown was extended three times and lasted until the end of May 2020, and in Lima, the central government declared a state of emergency and strict lockdown in March 2020 and only relaxed restrictions in June 2020 (WIEGO 2022).

A slow recovery of earnings was also noted with domestic workers' earning at the median 66 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 earnings. In Ahmedabad, Delhi and Lima, domestic workers had still not recovered any of their earnings at the median, as shown in Figure 2.



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 study survey data (2020, 2021)

By 2021, Round 2 study findings revealed that 82 per cent of domestic workers had returned to work. Nevertheless, domestic workers continued to face economic challenges in 2021. By mid-2021, as per Figure 2, WIEGO study findings found that only in Pleven had domestic workers fully recovered their pre-COVID-19 earnings, while the median earnings of domestic workers in Ahmedabad and Lima were at 60 per cent and 55 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 earnings. Across the six cities, earnings recovery was strikingly slower in Delhi, with domestic workers reporting they were at 10 per cent of their pre-pandemic earnings. Overall, 38 per cent of domestic workers were still earning less than 75 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 earnings in 2021.



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 study survey data (2020, 2021)

An IDWF study conducted in 2020 corroborates WIEGO study findings. The study found that 29 per cent of domestic workers surveyed in Africa across 14 countries were suspended or laid off during the lockdown period, while 18 per cent kept working but saw their hours and wages reduced (IDWF 2021a). Suspensions and layoffs were particularly prevalent in South Africa, Senegal and Kenya, where restrictions were strictest. In 14 Latin American countries, the IDWF survey found that in April and May 2020, 49 per cent of the region's domestic workers had no work as a result of being suspended or dismissed (IDWF 2021b).

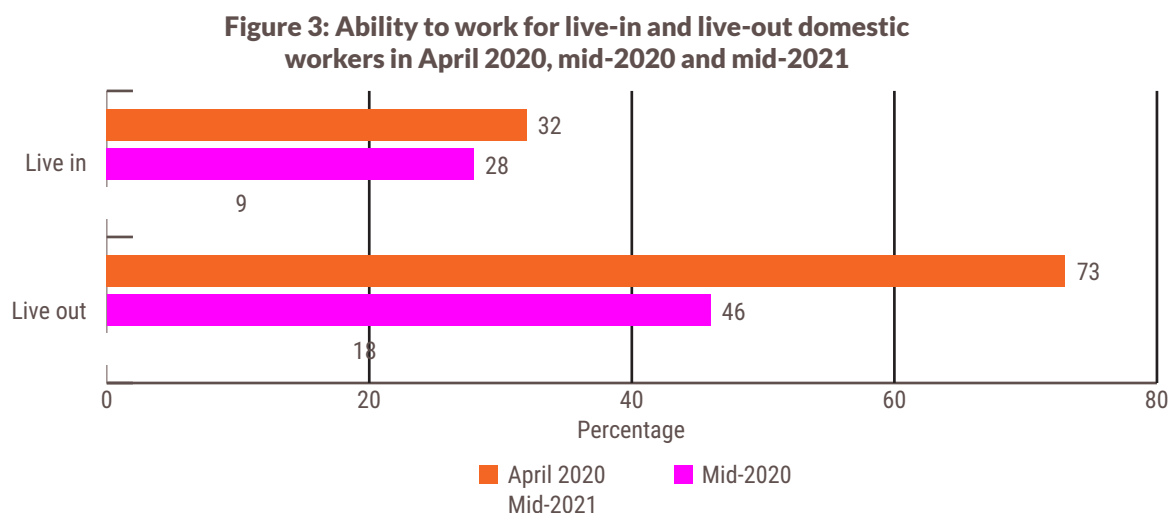
Impacts on Live-In and Live-Out Domestic Workers

WIEGO's study revealed that, during the two years of the pandemic, domestic workers' ability to work was largely shaped by their working arrangement: whether or not the domestic worker lived in her/his employer's home ("live-in") or commuted to work ("live-out"). Live-in workers were typically allowed to continue to work so long as they did not go out – in most cases, not even to visit their families. In contrast, live-out workers were more likely to lose their jobs at the beginning of the pandemic due to employers' fear of infection and city-level restrictions. As a result, many live-out workers reported on their struggles to find new work.

Figure 3 shows how the gap in the inability to work between live-in and live-out domestic workers was most pronounced during the peak lockdowns/restrictions in April 2020 (32% of live-in versus 73% of live-out), narrowed significantly by mid-2020, but increased again by mid-2021 (9% of live-in versus 18% of live-out). By mid-2021, just

over one-quarter of live-out domestic workers who reported they had stopped working received compensation from their employer.

Reflective of their ability to work, the earnings recovery of live-in domestic workers was far higher than that of live-out domestic workers in 2020, especially in April when the median earnings of live-out domestic workers were zero or near zero in five of the six cities (Ahmedabad, Bangkok, Delhi, Lima and Pleven). This gap had narrowed considerably by mid-2021 when the earnings recovery of live-in domestic workers reached the pre-COVID-19 level and the earnings recovery of live-out domestic workers was 88 per cent of the pre-pandemic level.



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 study survey data (2020, 2021)

Additionally, more than one-third (37%) of domestic workers in the the study were migrant workers⁶ and more likely to live with their employers. While employers’ attitudes and hiring practices brought about obstacles for all domestic workers, migrant workers were significantly affected. By mid-2021, three-quarters (74%) of migrant workers in domestic work reported that their ability to work was constrained because employers asked them not to come or were not hiring, compared to two-thirds (66%) of local workers. Migrant workers’ ability to work and recover their earnings were more limited than for local workers in all three reference periods (Figures 2 and 3).

Adverse Effects on Domestic Workers’ Employment Conditions and Livelihoods

The pandemic’s adverse impact on domestic workers’ ability to work, livelihoods and working conditions was mediated and intensified by distinct factors. WIEGO’s study found that the strongest factors included domestic workers’ reduced bargaining power, increased economic exploitation at the workplace, increased occupational health and safety risks, and pronounced mental and emotional stress.

⁶ They were internal migrants from different cities or towns in the same country.

Reduced Bargaining Power

In the absence of implementation and enforcement of effective laws covering domestic workers, working conditions are often based on negotiations between employers and domestic workers and are largely mediated by the balance of power in the employment relationship. The power of the employer to hire and fire workers is often balanced by the power of workers to organize in large numbers and to withdraw their labour if employers do not satisfactorily comply with their demands.

During the pandemic, disruptions to demand and supply factors in the domestic workforce affected the balance of power between employers and domestic workers and worsened the latter's unequal bargaining position. Both live-in and live-out domestic workers reported that the pandemic had reduced their bargaining power, contributing to a worsening of their work conditions. A domestic worker in Bangkok explained: "Most of the people who have a new job don't receive the salary as high as before. That's because we don't have the power to negotiate with the employers" (interview, 2021).

Decrease in Demand for Domestic Work

Findings from both rounds of the study show that on the demand side, domestic workers in all six cities experienced a decrease in demand for their work as employers' attitudes and hiring practices were impacted by the pandemic: more than two-thirds of domestic workers across the cities reported that their ability to work was constrained by employers not hiring or laying them off (this was reported by 66 per cent of domestic workers in April 2020 and by 75 per cent by mid-2021).

On one hand, employers' demand for domestic workers decreased as a result of their perception that the latter could be "vectors" of COVID-19. Domestic workers in both the Latin American and Indian cities emphasized this dynamic from the onset of the pandemic in interviews. A domestic worker in Mexico City explained: "My employer stopped calling because she was afraid that I would come to her house with the virus and, well, she fired me. She never picked up the phone again. They see us as a source of transmission" (open-ended survey question, 2020). In Ahmedabad, a worker leader reported that domestic workers working with older people and children were especially likely to be let go: "The women who worked as caretakers for children and elderly were also fired, [especially because] children and elderly have low immunity and are prone to getting infected quickly" (interview, 2021). In Lima, a domestic worker leader emphasized how older domestic workers were particularly concerned about the long-term consequences of the decrease in demand:

"Concerns at this time revolve around where to get a job to feed themselves and their families. Those who are older (40, 50 or more) think that they will never work again. If it was difficult to get a job before, it will be much more difficult later on. Those who have already started to look for work do not find it, or find that the conditions are very bad because they are treated as if they were infectious. The workers are kept at a distance, locked up and unable to communicate with their families."

- Interview, 2020.

On the other hand, the pandemic also brought about unstable social and economic circumstances for employers. Many used this as a justification for no longer being able to afford the services of domestic workers. At the onset of the pandemic, this was particularly noted in Lima, Mexico City, Plevn, Ahmedabad and Delhi.

During interviews in both Mexico City and Bangkok in 2020 and 2021, other domestic workers spoke of employers leaving the city. This often resulted in fewer work days and diminished job possibilities from new employers. “I had my working days reduced because one of my employers moved. Now I work two days a week instead of five” (open-ended survey question, 2021), reported a domestic worker in Mexico City. Similarly, in Bangkok, a domestic worker leader explained: “A number of people are unemployed this year. Some employers went back to their home country. There should [have] already been someone to replace their posts so that workers can be hired. However, there are no new employers” (interview, 2021).

Domestic workers also cited decreased dependency ratio as a factor impacting demand for domestic work. A worker leader in Ahmedabad explained: “Our women who were working as domestic workers were left jobless because the women [employers] in the houses started doing the work on their own” (interview, 2021). A worker leader in Bangkok detailed the situation:

“Employers don’t dare to recruit new workers. Currently, they stay at home and have time to wash their own clothes or do dishes. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, employers will endure and do the work by themselves. In the past, they would hire a worker and if that worker resigned, they would hire a new one right away. At the moment, if a worker resigns, the employer will wait and recruit fully vaccinated workers.”

– Interview, 2021.

Lower Salaries and Increased Competition in the Sector

On the supply side, in both rounds of the study workers reported increased competition. This is particularly attributed to the fact that workers informally employed in other sectors who lost their jobs were willing and able to join the domestic workforce given the low barriers of entry into the sector. WIEGO’s study tracked livelihood adaptations among workers in informal employment and found that, among workers from other informal sectors who switched their occupation, the most common switch was to domestic work. Almost one-third (31%) of informal workers who switched occupation were doing domestic work by mid-2021.

In the second round of the study, domestic workers reported that new domestic workers were sometimes willing to accept lower rates, further lowering domestic workers’ bargaining power. This was especially the case in interviews with workers in Ahmedabad, Delhi, Bangkok and Mexico City. A domestic worker leader from the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in Ahmedabad elaborated:

“Because 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 for less money [...] so if the employers are getting their work done for a lesser amount, why would they keep us?”

– Interview, 2021.

In Bangkok, a worker leader provided a similar case:

“For example, I used to earn 22,000 baht per month. I had to cook and clean the house. Now, the employer will negotiate with me and say that I have to cook, care for the children, and clean the house. In the end, I had to say yes because I feel that during this period of time, I don’t have any negotiating power with the employer. We don’t want to demand a lot of things. Almost 80 per cent of my friends who were looking for a new job now receive lower salaries. That’s because there are a lot of unemployed people in our group. The other reason is domestic work is the work that many women can do. Despite a lower income, they will still take up the work, and employers still have people to work for them.”

– Interview, 2021.

Ultimately, these demand and supply dynamics left workers vulnerable to accepting precarious working conditions. A domestic worker in Mexico City summed it up as follows:

“The most difficult thing has been to find work. And I’m a little desperate, because our income at home has fallen a lot. Right now I am only working four days a week with a single employer, and it pays me 150 pesos a day for five hours of work, which is very low, but it is what I have found, so I have to accept it, because it’s either that or nothing.”

– Interview, 2021.

Increased Exploitation in the Workplace

In addition to demand and supply dynamics, WIEGO’s study showed how weakened bargaining power exposed domestic workers to heightened risk of exploitative conditions. A domestic worker in Mexico City explained that “with the pandemic, the dynamics of exploitation, classism and racism returned, and many have had to accept these conditions out of necessity” (open-ended survey question, 2021).

First, domestic workers saw their workload increase. Across the six study cities, more than one in every five domestic workers reported working longer hours in both years of the pandemic (23% in mid-2020 and in mid-2021). Live-in domestic workers were especially prone to working overtime by mid-2020 compared to live-outs (44% compared to 12%); and while this difference had narrowed by mid-2021, it did not disappear (33% compared to 20%). The sanitation measures required for protection from COVID-19 often translated into increased workloads for domestic workers, as explained by a worker leader in Bangkok:

“Domestic workers need to be more strict with hygiene and cleanliness. I have to double my cleaning routine. For the bathroom, when cleaning, I need to check every nook and cranny is spotless. The female employer will check after me. I feel that the workload has increased. In my case, the female employer works at home. I am under her watchful eye. Everything I do from eating, sitting or lying down is being done under her watch.”

– Interview, 2020.

Similarly, a domestic worker from Lima stated that working overtime has become the new norm. The consensus among many workers was that they had no choice but to accept the additional burden: “There is no overtime now. I say ‘madam, I am going overtime’. And my employer said: ‘Yes, but the only solution is for you to hurry up, you have to move fast’” (interview, 2021).

The exploitation was marked by the fact that the increased workload was very frequently unaccompanied by increased earnings. A worker in Delhi described her circumstances: “Our work has increased and our earnings have reduced. We used to work in two houses to manage our own household, but now we’re having to work in three houses, and we are earning half the money. [...] It’s not like we’re getting the same money that we used to” (interview, 2020).

Second, when domestic workers were asked to not return to their employer’s home for an indeterminate time or were laid off, they were not paid any compensation. The study findings reveal that approximately three-quarters of domestic workers were not paid for the time they did not work by mid-2020 (75%) and by mid-2021 (76%). Live-ins were especially likely not to receive any compensation in both years (82% versus 75% of live-outs in mid-2020; 83% versus 73% in mid-2021).

This ongoing dynamic was highlighted by a domestic leader in Mexico City:

“During the first wave, workers were sent home without pay. When [employers] saw that the pandemic was going to continue, they no longer wanted to pay workers. Some workers had their salaries reduced, [while] others were fired. And during the second part of the pandemic, employers reduced workers’ work days or paid them less.”

– Interview, 2021.

A third dimension of exploitation resulted from some domestic workers reporting that they were being forced into isolation. At the onset of the pandemic, a domestic worker in Lima described the effects of being unable to leave her employer’s home: “Being away from my family has been the hardest thing. I have stayed at my employer’s house since the beginning of the quarantine. I haven’t been out or seen my family for more than three months” (open-ended survey question, 2020). The increase in unfair working conditions is best summarized by a domestic worker in Mexico City: “What has affected me the most during the pandemic is that it only left behind abusive employers. Since employers know that we are in need of work, they are not considerate. They think that I don’t get tired. I have to work as late as they want me to” (open-ended survey question, 2021).

IDWF’s study (2021a) corroborated these findings with half of domestic workers in their Africa study, across 14 countries, reporting that their workload intensified as a result of employers and employers’ children being at home. Similarly, a high percentage of surveyed workers in their Latin America study (2021b), across 14 countries, reported an increase in their working hours with no appropriate breaks and a more intense workload.

Occupational Health and Safety Risks and Mental Health Strains

On top of the deteriorating work conditions, domestic workers across the six cities confronted occupational health risks. As a consequence, large numbers of domestic workers were reporting mental and psychological strains two years into the pandemic.

By mid-2021, health concerns were considered the second-greatest obstacle to work during the pandemic for almost half of the domestic workers in WIEGO's study (46%). In cities with strong second COVID-19 waves in 2021, reports of exposure to the virus among domestic workers were high: Plevan (80%), Lima (64%), Mexico City (58%), Delhi (55%) and Bangkok (38%).

In both 2020 and 2021 interviews, there was strong consensus among domestic workers that, despite fears of contracting COVID-19, they needed to continue working. This sentiment was expressed by a domestic worker in Ahmedabad at the onset of the pandemic:

"Women are afraid of going to work in the corona-affected areas. They go to work because they are helpless. They are afraid of getting infected with the virus, but then we make them understand that they need not worry about it. They must just take care of the sanitization and wear masks while they step out of the house. [...] Poor women! They are very scared, [but] still they go to work. What will they eat if they don't work?"

- Interview, 2020.

By mid-2021, the sentiment was still strong. In Delhi, for example, a domestic worker leader from SEWA emphasized that the fear was widespread even as domestic workers were adhering to safety protocols. The same woman highlighted leaders' sense of responsibility to protect workers and the growing weight of doing so. She stated: "We were scared, but were trying not to be because if we got scared, those around us would get even more scared." A domestic worker leader from Bangkok similarly summarized the fear that both live-in and live-out domestic workers were still experiencing in 2021 as a result of being uncertain about what would happen should they fall ill:

"Those who are still employed are unable to go to places as employers are concerned that workers would carry the disease and infect them. We have to use public transportation, buses, skytrain/MRT, and such. If we are infected, we would not know what to do. Would there be a medical facility to treat us? Would we be unemployed? Would the employers help us? Would they still employ us?"

- Interview, 2021.

Domestic workers addressed their fears of losing their jobs by abiding to strict hygiene protocols in their place of work, often to the detriment of their own physical health. A domestic worker leader from Ahmedabad recounts the impacts of hygiene protocols on many domestic workers at the beginning of the pandemic:

"When a domestic worker reaches a particular house, her hands are sanitized by the sanitizer provided by the mistress of the house. The women are assigned work only after they have washed their sanitized hands. So, their hands were sanitized twice, one at the common entrance of the apartment and another at the respective house. The women frequently complained in various virtual meetings about the blistering of the skin on their hands."

- Interview, 2020.

In 2020 and still by mid-2021, both live-in and live-out domestic workers from Bangkok, Delhi and Lima reported such routines, reinforcing historic discriminatory practices against domestic workers.

Many domestic workers mentioned that they were “taking twice as much care of themselves” to ensure they continued to be “free from infection”. This is reflected in the fact that in mid-2020 and mid-2021 the vast majority of domestic workers reported use of personal protective equipment (PPE) (77% in mid-2020 and 95% in mid-2021). Nevertheless, most workers (75%) had to source their own PPE, and only 35 per cent reported that their employer had provided them with adequate supplies.

A domestic worker from Bangkok explains:

“We cannot live normally. We have to be really careful. We have to wear two layers of masks and wash our hands with alcohol gel all the time. Some employers do not sponsor such an expense, so we need to pay for these things ourselves. Last year, when face masks were in short supply, it was very difficult for us to get them. This year, we have a sufficient amount of face masks in the market, but the expense we have to bear is still there.”

– Interview, 2021.

Research conducted by IDWF in Africa (2021a) and Latin America (2021b) reveals similar findings with regard to workers having to source their own PPE and feeling particularly unsafe in their commutes to work. The IDWF studies found that different forms of gender-based violence increased the health and safety risks for domestic workers during the pandemic. In Latin America, this was evidenced by domestic workers, in particular live-ins, fearing more harassment and violence as a result of male employers working at home (2021, p. 26), while in some African countries, travelling long distances by foot on their commutes to work increased domestic workers’ risks of sexual assault (2021, p. 29).

In contrast to domestic workers’ efforts to protect themselves and their employers, employers sometimes hid information about being infected with COVID-19 and placed the workers at great risk. These examples emerged in interviews with domestic workers particularly in 2020 in Mexico City and in 2021 in Mexico City and Delhi. In other cases, particularly in 2021, employers of live-in domestic workers made them work even if they were sick.

By mid-2021, one-quarter of domestic workers had not been vaccinated against COVID-19 and were not planning to be vaccinated, and reported that this was because of limited availability of vaccine (24%) or ineligibility (22%). In Lima, almost three-quarters (74%) of domestic workers reported that they had not been vaccinated and were not planning to, mainly because they were not eligible for it (83%). In a few interviews, domestic workers reported that employers did not allow workers to take time off during working hours to register for vaccination.

These dynamics had direct impacts on domestic workers’ mental and psychological well-being. Twenty-three per cent of domestic workers reported concerns with their mental health in mid-2021, and this was particularly common among live-in domestic workers

(37% versus 20% of live-out domestic workers). A worker leader in Bangkok explained how increased workload in households particularly for live-in domestic workers was adding to stress levels:

“Live-in workers face a higher workload. During normal times, children could go to school, employers would go out to work at the office, and domestic workers would work at home. This is not the case now. Children are now learning online at home. If the parents aren't home, workers need to be doing housework, as well as making sure that children are learning online. This is additional work, and it also makes us more stressed, because our lives aren't the same.”

– Interview, 2021.

Interviews with live-in domestic workers and worker leaders suggest that such feelings of stress were compounded by isolation, overwork, fear of being fired or getting sick, and the inability to see or care for family members.

IDWF's study in Africa found that increased anxiety affected two-thirds of domestic workers surveyed (2021a). Live-in workers in the Latin America study (2021b) also reported experiencing more psychological, physical and sexual violence.

Access to Urban Services

While domestic workers' workplaces are private homes, their livelihoods still interface with the urban space. Live-out domestic workers' access to urban services, namely public transportation, is indispensable for them to commute to work and sustain their livelihoods. Nonetheless, during the pandemic, public transport became a major concern for live-out domestic workers because of lack of availability, increased costs or the fear of contracting the virus when using it. A worker leader in Mexico City, where 30 per cent of domestic workers reported transportation as a barrier to work, summarized the situation: “Transportation has been complicated in the pandemic, it was more expensive and I had to walk long stretches to get there because many stations were closed. Transportation has been a concern” (open-ended survey question, 2021).

The inadequate access to public transportation had implications for both the supply and demand for domestic workers. On the supply side, domestic workers' limited access to alternative modes of transport meant that they faced difficulties commuting to work, especially when they lived far from their employers. A leader in Ahmedabad explained:

“The women associated with our co-operative belong to the old city areas like Bapunagar, Amraiwadi, Gomtipur, Dani Limda, and they commute daily to areas like Satellite, Jodhpur, Shaila, Shilaj for work. Hence, they do not have any other option other than using public transport.”

– Interview, 2021.

In Pleven, domestic worker organizations reported that the decrease in the number of buses available as a result of the pandemic and the irregularities in bus schedules created a barrier for accessing workplaces.

Even when domestic workers resorted to private taxis to avoid public transport, they had to bear the additional costs, which further exacerbated their economic vulnerability.

A worker in Bangkok stated: “These days, COVID-19 is out there. We have to be more careful. We may need to take a taxi. We need to invest more to reduce the risk of travelling with congestion” (interview, 2021). In Mexico City, domestic workers reported that some employers were requiring them to take private taxis but were unwilling to cover these costs, adding burdens to workers’ depleted incomes.

On the demand side, employers’ fears of increased exposure to COVID-19 through domestic workers using public transportation led them to lay off domestic workers. Interviews with workers in Ahmedabad and Mexico City reveal how risks associated with public transportation led to a decrease in the demand for domestic workers. A worker leader in Ahmedabad explained:

“The women working as domestic workers use public transport for commuting. Hence, their employers would fear about their children and elderly getting infected since the women use public transport daily. Thus, their employers would ask them not to come to work. The employers were alright if the women used their personal vehicle to commute, but our women do not know how to drive two-wheelers.”

– Interview, 2021.

Corroborating these reports, the IDWF Africa study (2021a) found that 69 per cent of surveyed domestic workers found it more difficult to access public transportation amid widespread price speculation.

Access and Barriers to Government Relief

Not only did domestic workers face deficient and often exploitative working conditions, they were also left out of social security coverage, making the pandemic a particularly challenging period.

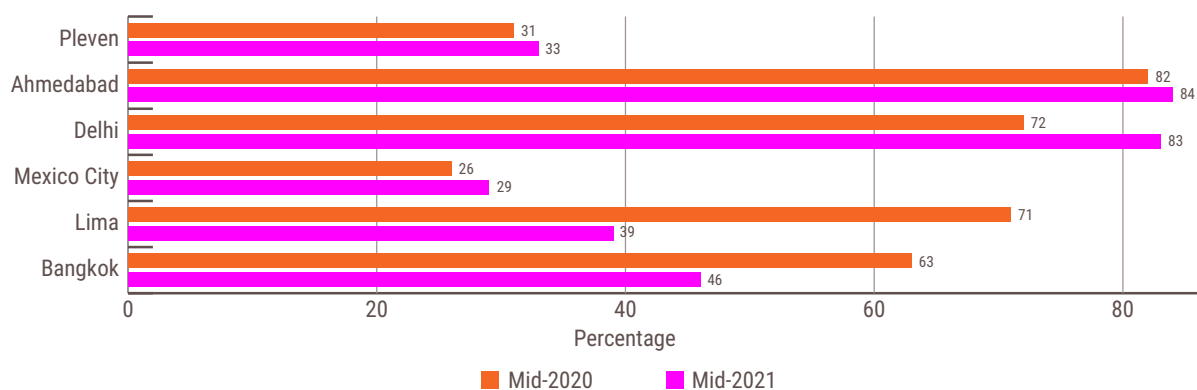
Of the domestic workers surveyed across the six cities, only one-third received cash and/or food relief from the government in the first three months of the pandemic. Almost half (48%) reported that they did not receive relief because they were ineligible for it, or they were eligible but not listed. A worker leader in Bangkok linked domestic workers’ limited receipt of governmental relief to the lack of their recognition as workers:

“For domestic workers, I heard some of our Thai friends say that the relief money granted by the government was provided to every occupation except domestic workers. Taxi drivers received 5,000 baht, right? But domestic workers didn’t get anything. Actually, being a domestic worker is also an occupation. We are workers and we should get assistance as workers, too. The government must help these workers.”

– Interview, 2021.

Between mid-2020 and mid-2021, only one-third received cash and/or food relief. As shown in Figure 4, a decrease in governmental relief was noted in Lima and Bangkok, while domestic workers in the other four cities reported slightly higher access to relief in the second year of the pandemic. However, by the second round of the study, a large proportion of domestic workers (41%) reported that there was no governmental relief available or they were unaware of it.

Figure 4: Relief by government in mid-2020 and mid-2021, by city



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 study survey data (2020, 2021)

In some cities, even when the government offered relief to workers in informal employment in the second year of the pandemic, domestic workers did not benefit from this. For instance, in Mexico City, while the government put in place relief measures that benefitted informal workers at the beginning of the pandemic, including MXN25,000 (about USD1,250) loans to domestic workers, these were not renewed in 2021 (WIEGO 2021).

Another example is from Ahmedabad, where the Gujarati state introduced state-level ration schemes for daily wage earners and migrant workers without ration cards, as well as other relief measures, including two loan schemes for vulnerable workers in both 2020 and 2021 (WIEGO & SEWA 2022). The exclusion of domestic workers from governmental relief often resulted from their socio-economic standing of being in the “missing middle”, where their salaries are too low and work arrangements too unstable to benefit from social security, but too high to benefit from relief. In Pleven, a domestic worker leader recounted the challenges faced by domestic workers as a result of such exclusion: “As an informal worker, I can't even take the child benefits that I deserve. They want documents that you are unemployed or that you work under an employment contract. I do not have those documents” (interview, 2021).

Another barrier to receiving relief mentioned by domestic workers was political favouritism; 20 per cent of domestic workers reported that they were unable to benefit from relief as governmental entities favoured their own political acquaintances.

Live-in domestic workers were particularly likely to be excluded from relief in the first three months of the pandemic; only one-fifth of live-in domestic workers received cash relief (20%) and 15% received food relief. This exclusion compounds disadvantages live-in domestic workers faced prior to the pandemic when their high likelihood of receiving payment in-kind limited their ability to contribute to and benefit from social insurance schemes (ILO 2022).

Migrant workers also often faced additional hurdles in accessing relief measures. In some cities, such as Mexico City, relief measures were explicitly restricted to residents, while in other cities, migrant workers faced administrative obstacles to receiving relief packages. In the Indian cities, migrant workers were excluded from relief programmes

due to difficulties obtaining the biometric Aadhaar identification because they could not attest to their residence in any place. A domestic worker explained:

“Definitely in Delhi, we see that many women domestic workers are migrants from Bengal and other states. The issue was that they did not have a ration card from the city, so they had a lot of difficulty in accessing ration shops.”

– Interview, 2020.

Similarly, in Bangkok, migrant domestic workers were excluded because their households were registered in other provinces, and as a result the system often counted domestic workers as farmers.

IDWF’s Africa study also found that domestic workers often were excluded from relief as a result of difficult application requirements, which included submitting online applications and not having requested documentation (2021a). Similarly, in their Latin America study, IDWF confirmed that many workers in the region were unable to access government support and, even when they were able to access it, the support was insufficient to meet their needs (2021b).

Domestic Workers’ Coping Strategies

Restricted earnings and deficient access to relief measures forced domestic workers into coping strategies likely to hinder their long-term well-being and entrap them in a cycle of poverty. Drawing down savings and borrowing from family or friends were the most common coping forms adopted by domestic workers in the first three months of the pandemic and between mid-2020 and mid-2021 (33% in both rounds for both types of coping). Between mid-2020 and mid-2021, domestic workers also resorted to reducing non-food consumption (31%) and food consumption (23%).

In Mexico City (56%) and Lima (47%) domestic workers were especially likely to report that they had to reduce food consumption. A worker in Lima emphasized the impacts of food insecurity on her children: “I don’t have any income and then can’t give food to my children” (open-ended question, 2021). A worker in Mexico City explained: “Before we were good eaters, I ate chilaquiles or eggs in the morning, now I opt for the practical and cheap and make a mixture of oats and seeds that helps me maintain weight and save money” (interview, 2021).

Live-in domestic workers were more likely than live-out domestic workers to use their savings (40% compared to 29% between mid-2020 and mid-2021; 40% compared to 33% in the first three months of the pandemic), while live-out domestic workers were more likely to borrow money from family or friends (32% compared to 27% between mid-2020 and mid-2021; 34% compared to 21% in the first three months).

Alarmingly, almost all (97%) domestic workers who had drawn down on savings since the beginning of the pandemic had not been able to replace any of those savings by mid-2021.

Domestic Worker Organizations' Solidarity Efforts and Organizing Strategies

As domestic workers found themselves out of work, afraid, unsure of how to protect themselves and unable to access relief, women-led domestic worker organizations stepped in to provide critical support. To assist their members and help them withstand the shock, the organizations offered comprehensive support⁷ including online counselling and regular telephone check-ins; informative online sessions, including on legal rights; accessible information on safety guidelines; PPE and food aid; loans and cash grants; assistance to access government relief, especially when it entailed cumbersome online processes; and advocacy efforts.

While the support provided by MBOs continued and evolved in 2021, MBOs and worker leaders faced considerable strains that curtailed their ability to provide the same level of support to members as they could at the start of the crisis. Despite these challenges, domestic worker organizations continued with myriad mutual aid efforts, including re-framing long-standing demands, particularly in light of the lack of support and recognition from both the state and employers. Table 1 highlights some of the main mutual aid strategies across the six cities from 2020 through to 2021.

Table 1: Domestic worker organizations' sources of support

Type of Support	Cities	Illustrative Quote
<i>Material relief</i> , including food rations or survival bags, PPE, raising funds for additional relief and/or covering medical expenses	Ahmedabad Bangkok Delhi Mexico City Lima	"We [SEWA grassroots leaders] facilitated the distribution of food grains kit, masks, sanitizer, biscuits and sanitary napkins provided by SEWA Federation to 100 of our sisters and adolescent girls. We had no grant at that time. If we had it then, we would have asked our members to prepare cooked meals and food packets just like we provided the order of making masks to our garment workers. And we [SEWA] provided an interest-free loan ranging from Rs. 10,000 to 50,000 to 556 of our women members, out of which 100 beneficiaries were domestic workers." – Ahmedabad, SEWA leader (Round 2 interview, 2021)
<i>Emotional and moral support</i> , including continued contact with workers, providing access to an in-house psychologist, online groups	Ahmedabad Bangkok Delhi Mexico City Lima Pleven	"The Instituto de Promoción y Formación de Trabajadoras del Hogar (IPROFHOT) provided an in-house psychologist. We have had a lot of domestic workers coming to IPROFHOT and we have also had a psychologist who was very supportive. She has assisted our colleagues. And the organization's president has been attentive at all times." – Lima, DW Leader (Round 1 interview, 2020)

⁷ For other examples of how domestic worker organizations and unions support efforts in Latin America, see Acciari et al. (2021).

<i>Informational support, including on health and safety protocols, access to relief, workers' rights</i>	Ahmedabad Bangkok Delhi Mexico City Lima Pleven	"Now, we are preparing as much as we can. Everyone knows exactly what to do when they are infected with COVID-19. We discuss this with each other via online video calls every day. When a person is coming for advice, we tell her what to do in each scenario. When we attend the meeting with the Federation or HomeNet, we share the information with others in our group. There are 137 members in the [...] group. Those who did not join the discussion received a private message to get the information. We talk to each other all the time and we update information daily [...] at least they can call people in the group and seek advice. They can talk to each other and relieve their anxiety." – Bangkok, DW Leader (Round 2 interview, 2021)
<i>Trainings, including workshops on livelihood adaptation, legal rights</i>	Ahmedabad Bangkok Mexico City Lima Pleven	"I've been in workshops that have helped me a lot. I wanted to pull out my hair and they've taken the time and, with empathy, have put themselves in our shoes to see how all this has affected us. They help us see how to react and how to get out of this situation". – Mexico City, DW (Round 1 interview, 2020)
<i>Access to health and vaccines</i>	Bangkok	"Homenet Thailand helped us with vaccine procurement. They requested a quota for 200 migrant domestic workers as they are unable to get vaccines themselves and no one cared to help them. But HomeNet helped us get vaccines, which are vital to our lives. This allowed us to be able to work outside. It was great, necessary and worthwhile." – Bangkok, DW (Round 2 interview, 2021)
<i>Livelihood adaptation, including worker platform/ application</i>	Bangkok Pleven	"Our MBO created a platform/application to get jobs for domestic workers. This project is good. The platform was recently launched and many workers got work from it. Many of us are unemployed, we need to find more channels to get jobs. Some people didn't get a full-time job yet, so working part time isn't bad. Some workers get jobs from this platform. It's useful for both Thai and Burmese people." – Bangkok, DW (Round 2 interview, 2021)

Source: Semi-structured interviews with domestic workers (2020 and 2021)

Another key dimension of domestic worker organizations' strategies has been to push for greater recognition of domestic workers and their long-held demands. On one level, the strategy has been to increase the number of training workshops for domestic workers on their legal rights. These rights awareness workshops range from ways to tackle day-to-day challenges faced by domestic workers, as well as the relevance of Convention 189.⁸

⁸ Mexico and Peru ratified Convention 189 in 2020 and 2018, respectively. India, Thailand and Bulgaria have not yet ratified C189.

In Mexico City, for example, a domestic worker leader from CACEH (Centro de Capacitación para Empleadas del Hogar) underscored the main objective of the training workshops and WhatsApp groups on legal advice: “We have chosen to give workers tools so that when they find a job they know how to establish their work schedule, establish their contract, their social security, and [that] their salary has to be based on a calculation that we have” (interview, 2021). While the work to disseminate reliable information over social media and online applications has been more intensive, this is deemed an important strategy to stay connected with the workers and strengthen movement building.

In India, SEWA leaders discussed a similar internal organizational strategy of raising rights awareness at the local and national level among domestic workers:

“We are making the women aware of their rights. Currently, a movement is going on at a national level to make the domestic worker aware of Convention 189, which describes their rights. At the local level, activities are undertaken to strengthen, expand the organization, and create awareness among workers through various training sessions conducted by the SEWA Academy. We conduct worker education sessions, call the youth committee, and organize many types of training such as understanding the legal aspects.”

– Interview, 2020.

On another level, strategies have been directed externally, whereby domestic worker organizations have worked to raise awareness of the need for social dialogue with the government and employers. A CACEH domestic worker leader noted:

“It is in our hands to make the employers aware of the issue of stable work, social security, and employment contracts. And to work with the authorities on the role of social dialogue, where we sit down and the government also listens to us, listens to our needs. The [government] should not only think that there is already a law for domestic workers. We can work in an allied way so that the problematic situation of domestic workers becomes more visible, so that there is employment recovery. [...] We have no choice but to do a lot of awareness-raising work with the employers and with the government, so that they can guarantee decent and safe work for domestic workers.”

– Interview, 2021.

Interviews point to an emphasis on dialogue as another of SEWA’s strategies to advocate for some level of protection for domestic workers with the central government. This strategy includes showing examples of welfare boards for other workers in informal employment that have served to guarantee minimum wages.

The pandemic was also a moment to hold the government accountable on the effective implementation of C189. In Lima, a domestic worker leader recounted the strategies undertaken:

“We are also fighting. We have sent letters to the government, to the president, talking to the congressmen who were there before, because we have to go back to work with these same congressmen and tell them to please respect the laws.”

[Convention] 189 agreement has already been signed and the rights [need to] be respected. They must comply with it, because it is useless for an agreement to be signed when it is not complied with. We have to be vigilant."

– Interview, 2021.

Ultimately, these organizing and advocacy strategies, grounded in a logic of care, helped domestic worker organizations strengthen communication among members. While some organizations noted a rise in membership numbers, others reported difficulty in expanding their membership base with all contact occurring virtually rather than in-person. Independent of these challenges and the inability to secure employment for many domestic workers, there was a common perception among domestic worker leaders that members began emphasizing the benefits of belonging to an organization. A domestic worker leader from Bangkok best summarizes a fundamental lesson from the pandemic:

"I think there is a higher level of solidarity among us. We are more united. It may be because we already know that having an organization is beneficial to us. In the past, domestic workers were scattered everywhere. We were unable to get together since workers did not see the importance of being together as a group. Once the crisis hit, workers realized that they would not be able to survive if they were all alone."

– Interview, 2021.

IDWF has also played a vital role in strengthening movement building during the crisis. In Africa, domestic workers' unions launched awareness-raising campaigns for both workers and employers, distributed food and PPE, and trained domestic workers in new economic activities such as making masks and soap for sale (IDWF, 2021a). Similarly in Latin America, IDWF contributed with campaigns to enable domestic worker unions to provide basic food baskets, PPE kits and resources for the payment of prepaid cell phone services, so that they could continue operating and communicating with their members (IDWF, 2021b).

Long-Standing Inequalities and Key Demands for Change

The pandemic intersected with and risked worsening long-standing inequalities faced by domestic workers. Their exclusion from national labour laws, as well as their lack of recognition as workers, meant that domestic workers had limited claim to social protections and governmental relief during the pandemic and an inadequate social and economic safety net to fall on. This aggravated precarity during the pandemic weakened domestic workers' bargaining power vis-à-vis employers, contributing to a worsening of their working conditions and to increased exploitation in their working arrangements. Alarming, these adverse impacts on domestic workers' circumstances in some instances produced setbacks in years-long battles for better working conditions.

When domestic workers were asked about their sector's needs to recover, while some mentioned immediate relief in direct response to the pandemic such as cash and food relief, most mentioned demands linked to structural and systemic issues and inequalities. They largely asked for better legal coverage, more effective access to social security, more stable working conditions – including enforcement of contracts between domestic workers and their employers, enhanced livelihood opportunities, and increased recognition.

The need for training and information was also frequently mentioned, particularly training that would familiarize domestic workers with their rights and provide them with guidance on how to increase their earnings. In fact, low levels of awareness among domestic workers of their rights, legal limits and applicable wages contribute to the limited enforcement of laws and protections. Accordingly, and as highlighted in the previous section, training on their rights is essential to ensure that domestic workers benefit from the protections they are entitled to.

Table 2: Domestic workers' key demands

Demand	Key dimensions	Roles government and/or employer should play
Fair terms of employment: right to employment for specified number of days at specified wage rates with legal protection against abuse by employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish fixed working hours • Establish minimum wage • End harassment and stigmatization by employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government should guarantee implementation of laws to protect domestic workers from harm • Employers should guarantee decent working conditions <p>Worker demands in: Bangkok, Mexico City, Lima, Delhi and Ahmedabad</p>
Livelihood opportunities and employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in securing livelihood opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments should invest in the promotion of economic growth strategies that are inclusive of informal workers <p>Worker demands in: Bangkok, Mexico City, Lima, Delhi and Ahmedabad</p>
Social protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expansion of sick leave and maternity leave • Support for access to health services, including vaccinations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments should invest in the extension of social security schemes that are inclusive of informal workers • Employers should support workers' access to health services, including vaccinations <p>Worker demands in: Bangkok, Mexico City</p>
Skills training and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courses for skills training and/or livelihood adaptation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government should invest in livelihood skills training and development <p>Worker demands in: Bangkok, Mexico City</p>
Immediate material relief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension of relief to domestic workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments should ensure extension of relief to domestic workers as part of economic recovery strategy <p>Worker demands in: Bangkok</p>
Recognition and Dignity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize the contributions of domestic workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments should promote the valorization and recognition of domestic work • Employers should recognize the essential services provided by domestic workers and treat them with respect <p>Worker demands in: Bangkok, Mexico City, Plevan</p>

Source: Interviews and open-ended survey questions (2020, 2021)

Conclusion

Despite their contributions to supporting households and societies, domestic workers have typically earned some of the lowest wages (ILO 2011a) and have often been excluded from national laws and legal and social protections. This is reflective of the undervaluation and lack of recognition of domestic work. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a contradiction: while domestic workers were essential in the provision of care for families, their lack of legal and social protections resulted in increasing socio-economic vulnerabilities, including exploitation and loss of income.

Understanding the household as a site of power relations and exploitation helps cast light on not only the ways in which paid and unpaid domestic work has historically been naturalized as women's work, but also on how care work often serves as a shock absorber in households and communities in times of economic crises (Kabeer et al. 2021, Espey et al. 2010). Recognizing how paid domestic work cuts across gender, race and class inequalities within and across countries (Acciari et al. 2021, Kabeer et al. 2021) is fundamental to tackling the fault lines in domestic workers' lack of legal and social protections.

WIEGO's study highlighted the extent of the domestic workers' common vulnerabilities across the six cities, particularly in terms of the slow earnings recovery rates, intensification of exploitative working conditions and increased concerns over health and safety, including workers' emotional well-being. The study also showed how the aforementioned differentiated impacts, compounded by isolation and fear, were experienced in distinct manners by live-in and live-out domestic workers, as well as migrant domestic workers.

Nevertheless, the agency of domestic worker organizations and unions enabled leaders to provide much-needed support and relief at a moment where the state and capital largely failed. The levels of solidarity and resilience of organizations helped several domestic worker organizations put into place organizational strategies focused on strengthening both movement building and internal communications. Furthermore, domestic worker leaders understood the possibilities for shifts in the policy terrain. Where possible, organizations redirected their claims-making strategies at local and national levels, while striving to increase the visibility of these demands more broadly.

The structural and systemic inequalities of the economic, health and care crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic present an opportunity for a paradigm shift. In this regard, it is a moment to learn from the long-standing demands that domestic worker organizations and unions have fought to make visible and their bottom-up solutions and strategies for dialogue with the state and employers.

Appendix I: Organizations and Researchers Involved in the Study

City	Partner and collaborating organizations	Researchers
Ahmedabad	SEWA, SEWA's Indian Academy of Self-Employed Women and some grassroots researchers from the SEWA Union	SEWA Academy Team: Namrata Bali, Bansari Buha, Archana Dave, Jignasa Dave, Basanti Khanayat, Shanta Koshti, Gita Naila, Jayshree Panchal, Ramesh Parmar, Jasu Rathod, Khyati Shah
Bangkok	Federation of Informal Workers Thailand (FIT); HomeNet Thailand	Pakavadee Boonkacha, Punjaree Duangngoen, Jantana Ekeurmanee, Puttinee Gopatta, Wanida Kotcharsarn, Wichaya Komin, Puttinee Kophatta, Boonsom Namsonboon, Walee Naksuwan, Indira Oonjaoban, Kantarose Pinthong, Borvorn Subsing, Poonsap Tulaphan
Delhi	Janpahal; SEWA Delhi	Malavika Narayan, Avi Majithia, Shalini Sinha, Ankit Jha, Aamir Sherwani Khan. Additional research support from Indo Global Social Service Society, Janpahal, and SEWA Delhi
Lima	Instituto de Promoción y Formación de Trabajadoras del Hogar (IPROFOTH); Sindicato de Trabajadoras del Hogar del Perú (SINTRAHOGARP); Sindicato de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar de Lima (SINTTRAHOL)	Edith Anampa, Themis Castellano, Guillermo Perez, Carmen Roca
Mexico City	Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar (SINACTRAHO)	Jesús Bedoya, Yuleina Carmona, Tania Espinosa, Erick Serna Luna, Natalia Torres
Pleven	The Bulgarian Trade Union of Self-Employed and Informal Workers (UNITY)	Svetla Ilieva, Plamena Tsonova, Cvetelina Velichkova, Violeta Zlateva

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About WIEGO

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.