

**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE INVISIBLE
WORKERS OF THE HOUSEHOLD ECONOMY**



Domestic Workers Rights Union (DWRU)

Bruhat Bangalore Gruhakarmika Sangha (BBS)

Manegelasa Kaarmikara Union

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Our Demands

While the residents take no responsibility for domestic workers, they are playing a decisive role in their work and earnings. The municipal corporation (BBMP) advisory talks of only how to sanitise and keep clean and safe for the individuals and within the apartments, but has nothing about the safety of the domestic workers or security guards.

A few demands are put forth for a better, more dignified and just treatment of the human beings working as domestic support.

For the government

- The Department of Labour, Government of Karnataka, must ensure the registration of domestic workers as “workers”.
- All domestic workers, irrespective of the categories, should be included in the social security net. The Karnataka Government has announced a relief package for unorganised sector workers, including a cash transfer of 5000 INR. This currently does not include domestic workers and steps must be taken urgently to rectify this.
- As immediate income and livelihood support, a cash transfer of 3000 INR every month for the months of April and May, and till the end of this year should be given.
- To specifically ensure support for women above the age of 50 who have lost their jobs, the government should put together a pension scheme for them.
- A directive should be published targeting all Resident Welfare Associations and employers to furnish all information about live-in domestic workers, and their health and working conditions.
- Domestic workers must be accorded the right to collective bargaining and employers must engage with the grievances highlighted in this period of the pandemic.
- The Government of Karnataka must issue directions to resident welfare associations (RWAs) to comply with the recommendations in the following section to ensure safety and stable livelihoods for domestic workers.

For resident welfare associations

- Domestic workers, like any other workers, are entitled to safe and dignified livelihoods. As per the government advisories on employee retention, they must be taken back unconditionally. They must not be kept in the dark about their jobs or postponement, and adequate wage compensation to be given for the next three months.
- Domestic workers must not be discriminated against or looked at as “higher risk” individuals. They must not be advised to “not take the lift” and no such discriminatory practices should be implemented.
- They cannot be removed from premises for waiting in the common area. This is their natural waiting space. Instead, proper training on social distancing must be provided by apartments to domestic workers.
- A regular supply of fresh masks, gloves and hand sanitisers must be provided by the apartments to every domestic worker just like in any other workplace.
- Guards and facility managers must be trained on treating the domestic workers with due respect. Domestic workers must be given the contact number of a member of an Internal/External Complaints committee for escalating any matters regarding discrimination, exploitation or violation of their dignity.
- Measures must be taken to limit the collection, and ensure the protection, of data collected from domestic workers.
- Under no circumstances must domestic workers be threatened to come to work if they are unwilling to.
- Apartment owners must pay their domestic workers fully wages for the period of the lockdowns and any ongoing and future period where domestic workers are not being prohibited from coming to their place of employment.

The Context

Domestic workers are the silent and invisible backbone of the economy. The last two decades has seen a sharp increase in their participation in the workforce. An estimated 4 lakh domestic workers live and work in the city of Bengaluru. Majority being women, they constitute a large segment of female urban workers. The large majority of these women do part time work in multiple households, keeping long hours, facing caste discrimination, assault on their dignity through rude comments from their employers, no social security, and no legal rights as other formal workers like regular leave and bonus. Additionally, majority being women, along with the gendered notion of housework, their work is devalued and it is considered natural that these women should slave in their work. Despite decades of toil and hard work, domestic workers have been made invisible.

The employer-employee relationship in this sector is very unique. It is individualised, caste-based, and has patriarchal overtones despite the employer being a woman herself. All work matters are looked at as a private contract (unspoken, unwritten) between employers and employees. The Government, through the Labour Department, passes on its responsibility as regulator and enforcer of laws to the employers. The Government refuses to recognize that, as per the constitutional obligations of the government, domestic workers are entitled to basic livelihood rights and labour rights like increments, wage security, regular leave and other benefits.

Furthermore, live-in migrant domestic workers like our members Victoria, Dashmi, Usha, Nirmala, and Nahar share a common history. Thousands of women and girls all over the country fall prey to either trafficking or placement agencies or enter into the urban upper middle class and elite households in search of livelihoods. They work long hours, with no rest or free time, suffer from all kinds of indignities, not given their salary, face sexual harassment and severe isolation. Cases of illegal confinement, wrong allegations of theft, sexual harassment, abuse, are often seen with no redressal mechanisms or even attempt to give justice. The common basic understanding being that they are not employees, but rather invisible people meant to be in a feudal relationship of servitude.

Despite the significant contribution of domestic workers to the economy, their presence and needs are largely ignored, and highly devalued. They are always relegated to the background, even when it comes to deaths, accidents, dismissal and illness on account of their working conditions. Labour entitlements and protections such as wages, medical support, maternity benefits, insurance, and pension are all arbitrary and left to the whims of each employer.

The lockdown scenario and domestic workers: Eroding decades of hard-fought gains in March 2020

Up until the first phase of the imposition of lockdown in India, while restrictions were enforced, domestic workers went to work as usual till the end of March. Domestic workers were aware of the announcements of precautions, but the employers insisted they come for work disregarding any concerns for safety.

During the phase of strict imposition of the first lockdown, covering the time from March 24, 2020 to the first week of May, several corporate employees “worked from home”. While pictures of employers’ families creating, spending family time, learning to clean and cook, zoomed on social media and in press, the domestic workers lived in cramped conditions with the fear of rations running out.

Domestic workers did not have the luxury to ‘work from home’. For almost all domestic workers, this meant an inability to work. They still had to pay house rent, electricity bills, water bills, monthly expenses for food, without any source of income. No work translated to no salary for them. It became question of their survival! Some of the owners paid the salary for March for the number of days worked, while few employers paid full month’s salary for March. April was totally without work and money for domestic workers. With rents and bills to pay most of them could barely manage one meal a day.

Schools started taking classes and examinations online. But most of the children of domestic workers can’t afford to have smart phones, laptops and seamless internet connections to attend classes online. The divides in our society reflect in the digital divide, and the digital divide has the potential of worsening these pre-existing social divides.

Domestic workers’ stories

“I worked in March and didn't get paid anything for April. Employer said they would pay only once we resume work, but they haven't called us back to work yet,” Mohana, a domestic worker from Bangalore said.

The reason she and her sisters have not been called back to work yet is because there is a raging debate taking place in many residential societies over whether it's prudent to allow domestic workers to come into people's homes or not? Mohana continued “I have to pay Rs. 5000 as rent, electricity and water bills are extra. I do not have local ration card since my native is in Andhra Pradesh. I am not eligible for ration. How will I manage so many expenses without work? When will the lockdown end?”

“Restrictions may be gone, but the coronavirus hasn't. As letting people in from the outside of their gated middle-class colonies could bring in the deadly Covid-19 virus to an area which has so far managed to remain infection-free”.

Everywhere the unions went, or received calls from, the same grievances were being expressed. Many employers had not called up even once to enquire about their well-being. Several employers clearly told us that the domestic worker who worked at their apartment called up to enquire about the children and how the employers are managing! Many across the city, especially those who worked in apartments, reported that despite the Government advisory that everyone should be given full salary for the month of April, huge numbers are denied their due salary. This is shocking and unjust!

Some domestic workers have also been told by their employers not to come in as they will infect their families, without realising that it is the employers who travel abroad, who will possibly bring the infection to their domestic workers. Many of the women we met are angry and hurt by the treatment meted out by their employers. There was disbelief that the houses where they worked for 10 years or more are treating them as polluted, as if they are the virus!

Voices of despair are high, about how to manage their families as many of them are single earners, how to pay rent or for gas or, and how to repay the loans taken during sickness and other emergencies. Several elderly domestic workers suffer from illnesses like diabetes, anaemia and malnutrition. Some of them also care for those with mental health challenges and disabilities at their own homes.

Our survey of the domestic worker's socio-economic situation

2084 (about 87%) of the workers were told not to come for work since the lockdown in March and were not sure if and when they would be called to work again.

341 workers in the areas surveyed by BBGS (87%) and 150 workers in the areas surveyed by Manegelasa Kaarmikara Union lost their jobs entirely during the lockdown. 91% of workers lost their salaries for the month of April.

50% of all workers above the age of 50 lost their jobs during the lockdown.

In the first 2 weeks of May, a survey of 2396 domestic workers in Bengaluru was conducted through in-person and telephonic surveys. The domestic workers worked in apartments across Jayanagar, J.P. Nagar, Banashankari, Koramangala, HSR Layout, Marathahalli, and Kundlahalli by the Domestic Workers Rights Union; in C.V. Raman

Nagar, Jayanagar, K.R. Puram, Koramangala, and Mahadevpura by Bruhat Bangalore Gruhakarmika Sangha (BBGS); and in Koramangala, Domlur, New Bayyapanahalli, Old Bayyapanahalli, Lingarajpuram, Kottur, Indiranagar and KR Puram by Manegelasa Kaarmikara Union. The apartments mainly house employees from software and multinational companies.

The results of the survey show that 2084 (about 87%) of the workers were told not to come for work since the lockdown in March and did not know if and when they would be called back to work. Many said they were told this over the phone and also categorically told not to call them. “We will call you after two months,” said most employers. 341 (86%) of workers in the areas surveyed by BBGS and 150 workers in the areas surveyed by Manegelasa Kaarmikara Union lost their jobs entirely in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Moreover, 2180, or 91% of workers lost their salaries for the month of April. This is despite the guidelines from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) for employers to pay employees their full wages. The women were told off saying that as the employers themselves are not working and getting less money they don’t see the need to pay them. They said, “We ourselves got half pay so why do we pay you?” Some of them indicated that they now will switch over to labour saving technologies, and will not spend money on domestic workers. The undertones of caste discrimination as domestic workers are perceived to be “unhygienic” have also emerged in advertisements such as the one taken out by Kent RO systems for their Bread and Atta maker that portrayed domestic workers as infection carriers.

Another significant revelation from the survey was that in three apartments many employers have taken the decision to not take back or employ anyone above 50 years of age. 50% of all workers above the age of 50 lost their jobs during the lockdown. Tears were seen in the eyes of many domestic workers, to see this rejection from people from whom they have worked loyally for many years. Today they are so easily disposable! Some apartments embarked on first screening the workers before taking them in the compounds, and then wait for 14 days before they will take them inside the house.

If this is the scenario in urban Bengaluru, where there is a fair organisation of workers, one can imagine the plight of domestic workers in independent houses and small cities and towns.

Actions of resident welfare associations (RWAs)

Another urban phenomenon is the residents welfare associations (RWA). RWAs are usually active in the maintenance issues, security and registrations issues of their members, but have refused to engage with the grievances of domestic workers every time. Currently, the situation is the same. While they realise the contributions of the domestic workers to their homes, many of their attitudes, as employers and as

Managing Committees, are negative.

The period of relaxation of the lockdown has again seen RWAs issuing directives that are very insulting and demeaning to domestic workers. Some workers have complained about how the managing committees in RWAs are making them sign a declaration from the employers that the resident is responsible for the health of all the residents if they take their domestic worker back to work!

As per email issued by the management committee of several RWAs, residents have been advised to ask the domestic workers to minimize or avoid usage of the lift and take the stairs instead. Why is such advice for the domestic workers only? No such advice has been issued for anyone else including residents, delivery boys, security staff etc. Such discrimination implies that domestic workers are unhygienic or less careful about their health. Specifically pointing this out for domestic workers is highly discriminatory.

Management Committees of some RWAs also notified that a domestic worker seen in the common area without a mask or in a group will be asked to immediately leave the premises. They also discourage domestic workers from waiting in the common areas. However, many of these domestic workers work in multiple houses and might have a gap between finishing work in one house and starting work in another. In such cases, where will they wait if they are not allowed to wait in the common area of the apartment premises? These instructions will be given to security guards who will then exert their dominance on the domestic worker and can potentially misbehave with them.

Furthermore, residents were requested to collect the address details of their domestic workers and share it with the management committee and facility manager. In the past, there have been instances of the ex-facility manager coming to work under the influence of alcohol and indulging in inappropriate behaviour. One of them has also misused contact details of tenants and sent messages on their phone without consent. There is no internal complaint committee (ICC) for the domestic worker to reach out to in case of any issues that occur in these apartments. Where will they go to seek help if they have been misbehaved with or if their data has been misused or if they have been discriminated against? Most of them also fear retaliation or loss of their livelihood.

The sharing of details (Aadhaar card, phone number, address) with members of the managing committee is violative of domestic workers' privacy. Why is personal and sensitive information of the domestic workers treated so lightly and shared with such members and what is the guarantee that it will not be misused? There is no protocol on protecting such personal and sensitive data. Assuming that this information is required to ensure that domestic workers are not travelling from a cluster or containment area, a better method should be suggested. It should not be required to share such personal information with the entirety of the RWA membership.

Reactions of the Employers

At the same time there is a demand and realisation among many employers that they need the care givers and want to employ them back. Many residents are old, living alone, have had loyal caretakers, and therefore find the rules and reasons of the RWAs too restrictive and binding. They feel it should be left to the discretion and responsibility of the individual employers. Among them is Brigadier (Retired) Kuldeep Singh Chokkar who describes his situation as "extremely challenging".

Some residential groups pointed out that the needs of the old and infirm cannot be ignored. Most Indian middle-class homes are not equipped with gadgets like dishwashers and washing machines and housework can be tough for them. Brigadier (Retired) Kuldeep Singh Chokkar is 80 years old, and is a cancer survivor fitted with a pacemaker, and lives with his wife who is 75 years old and has her own health issues. "If we were younger, we'd manage fine, but we are facing a lot of problems maintaining our home," he lamented over the phone. Until the lockdown, Brig Chokkar had a part-time maid, a gardener and a car cleaner coming in daily. "Absolutely," he says when I ask him if he is looking forward to their return, "It will make my life a lot easier."

Anil Tiwari, president of the posh ATS Greens building society in Noida on the outskirts of the Indian capital, Delhi, says they are positively thinking about allowing the maids to come in, "We have 735 apartments and there are many senior citizens who live here alone. Many of them are facing a lot of hardships so we have to take that into account."

Abhishek living in Bangalore said, "Me and my wife both in software industry are working from home, doing all the household chores and managing our 1-year old kid without our domestic worker and babysitter. We feel overworked, fatigued and it has become a reason of discontent between us. We are looking forward to welcoming our maid as soon as possible"

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