



**Domestic Workers Trade  
Deep Dive:  
A Report on SEWA Union  
domestic workers**

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## Introduction:

Domestic workers make up a significant percentage of the workforce not just in India but throughout the world as well. Unfortunately, in India there is a constant gap between domestic workers and their inclusion in policy both for their protection as well as their welfare. Domestic work is still not recognised as labour and domestic workers are not recognised as labourers, as they are still not included under the protections offered by existing labour laws which labourers in other trades are entitled to.

While domestic workers are covered under the law against sexual harassment at workplace but their coverage under Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (which provides health insurance coverage to the unrecognised sector workers belonging to the BPL category and their family members) and Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008 (which provides for the social security and welfare of unorganised workers and for other matters connected therewith or incidental thereto) is piecemeal. While this Act is a watershed moment since it recognises the employer–employee relationship in the context of paid domestic work within private households but the subsequently formed policy framework (National Policy on Domestic Workers) by the task force (which had to evolve a policy framework for domestic workers to ensure their social security) did not get approval by the Cabinet, thereby stalling the process.

The plight of domestic workers received space in the public forum mostly with the adoption of Convention 189 on Domestic Workers by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The Convention seeks to ensure decent work for domestic workers and urges the signatory countries to adhere to certain labour standards in employing domestic workers. Although India supported the adoption of this Convention, it is yet to ratify<sup>1</sup> it, which is a significant setback for the entire community of domestic workers.

### What is domestic work? Who are domestic workers?

Domestic work, refers colloquially to a household, which is the place of work and the person working in that household is the worker. The difference lies in how much responsibility we designate to the employer in a domestic household and a

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<sup>1</sup> Ratify means to sign or give formal consent to (a treaty, contract, or agreement), making it officially valid. All agreements need to be signed by the country and then begin the process of its ratification. Ratification indicates that the country indicates its consent to be legally bound to adhere to the agreement.

conventional work space, which can be such as factory or office space. For example, an employer in general would be mandated to adhere to certain working conditions, payment of minimum wages, adhere to guidelines depending on nature of work expected, a fixed number of work hours, duration of employment, paid leaves, maternity leaves and other mandated regulations as per Indian labour laws. These expectations are not levied on domestic employers, as there has been a systematic erosion of and invisibilisation of rights and entitlements of domestic workers. This relationship between a domestic worker and their employer, even if it was contractual is unlikely to be formalized because there are no consequences of not adhering to it.

Domestic work does not have a uniform definition and entails a myriad of tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, washing utensils, taking care of the children in the house, taking care of the elderly in the house, purchasing groceries, tending to the unwell, looking after pets in the house. Domestic workers are mostly women because this is a gendered occupation, domestic work is seen as an extension of the work they do in their own homes. In this study the reality that domestic workers have almost no bargaining power and no ability to assert their rights was starkly highlighted. They more often than not rely on the kindness and generosity of their employer for basic entitlements such as sick leave, increase in salary and other benefits, they cannot ask for them as something they should be entitled to as workers, this grim situation makes them vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of their employers.

### SEWA and Domestic workers:

Domestic workers are often migrants (which is why most domestic workers are based out of urban areas). The ILO estimates that there are over 4.75 million or close to 50 lakh domestic workers but the actual numbers could be much higher. These include full-time, part-time, and live-in workers. Their place of work is their employers home, this makes them vulnerable to poor working conditions, sexual assault, denial of payment of wages, no leaves (paid or otherwise). SEWA has been working actively with domestic workers for their betterment since several decades now. SEWA has invested in technical and soft skills training, along with mobilisation and organising of domestic workers to give them bargaining power as well as making them aware of their rights and then advocating for the same.

The wages and job placement of domestic workers is directly related to their skillset. To have a diverse set of skills which are in demand, ensures higher wages and better employment opportunities for domestic workers, SEWA has invested in technical and soft skill training for domestic workers in Patna, Delhi, Kerala, and Cuttack

equipping members with skills in elderly care, midwifery, and basic first aid. Additionally, SEWA helps domestic workers to promote and market these skill sets to employers to increase their wages and work in safe, dignified working conditions. SEWA has organized domestic workers across India and is a member of the National Platform of Domestic Workers (NPDW). Through this platform SEWA has contributed to and submitted legislation for the protection of domestic workers.

## Rationale of Study:

Employment of domestic help has been rising significantly since the post liberalisation era. While economic growth, change in lifestyle and participation of more women in the workforce have been driving factors to increase demand for domestic help, the benefits of this have not trickled down to the domestic workers themselves, despite the increase in availability of work opportunities. There is a pressing demand for domestic workers to be seen as workers too. This study was carried out to understand the lived realities and vulnerabilities of domestic workers who are otherwise not included under the ambit of any labour law. This exclusion has been amplified by the lockdown due to the COVID pandemic and very little is being done to address the concerns of domestic workers.

## Scope of Study:

The study focuses on understanding the social economic background of the worker, the nature of income, their understanding of job security, provision of leave (paid or otherwise), their access to social security schemes and other welfare schemes mandated by the government, the ownership and loss of assets, as well as ability to access telephonic and internet facilities. All of these parameters have been looked at from the lens of the COVID-19 virus and subsequent lockdown.

Questions on the lines of sexual harassment faced at the employers residence or while commuting, were left out. Similarly, questions on the local complaints committee (LCC) were also left out as this study only focuses on the coronavirus pandemic and the impact of the subsequent lockdown. Subsequent iterations will pick up these critical themes.

## Research questions:

The study attempts to answer the subsequent research questions:

1. What are the real life implications on domestic workers of not being recognised as “workers” under labour codes?
2. How are vulnerabilities of domestic workers heightened in the wake of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown?

## Methodology:

The ideation of the study began with understanding the nature of the existing work SEWA did with the domestic workers, and what were the issues that they wanted to understand to make their work better. SEWA State Coordinators, Organizers and Aagewans were reached out to and the rationale of the study was explained to them, they thereafter spoke with members and familiarised them with the study.

Close to two hundred fifty phone numbers of the domestic workers who were part of the SEWA Union were sought from five states: Bihar, Delhi, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand. They were then reached out for telephonic interviews. Survey instrument has been attached as Appendix A.

## Sample:

The sample consisted of only women domestic workers. They are all members of the SEWA Union. The sample size was decided to be 75 domestic workers, located across 5 states. They were reached out to via telephonic interviews. There are fifteen people per state and the states are: Bihar, Delhi, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Uttarakhand. The attrition rate was around thirty percent. There were issues in reaching out to people as their mobile phones had not been recharged in the lockdown and the incoming call facility had been discontinued by their service provider.

## Analysis:

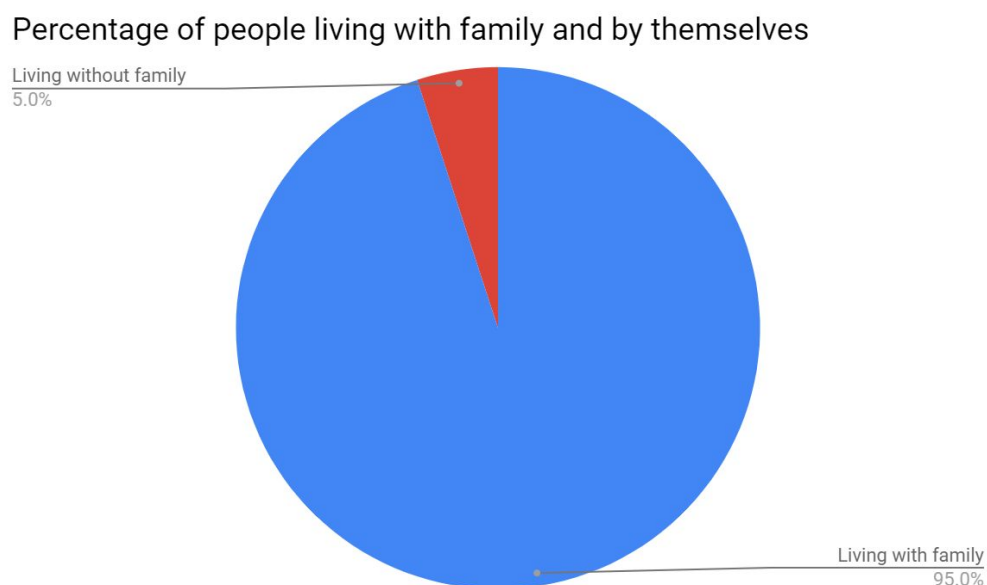
The change in the socio-economic standards of the working class has given birth to a demand for domestic workers, but since their work is confined to the private sphere, it is not recognized as work which is productive in nature, as their services are sought to make the employer productive. This dismissal of visibility of domestic workers and their labour, even in the informal labour market only adds to the invisibilization

done by labour laws. Domestic work is seen as low skill work requiring no education or training, the first to be sucked into it are women and children especially those who are vulnerable and come from no means. Data was collected on the themes of socio economic conditions, income effect, job insecurity, health, sick and paid leaves, occupational safety, social security and access to welfare schemes (food, finance and health related), loans, monetary aid/ loan from employer, loss of assets, access to telecommunication, information & digital services. The analysis of the data collected has been done thematically on the above mentioned themes and the key points are:

Background:

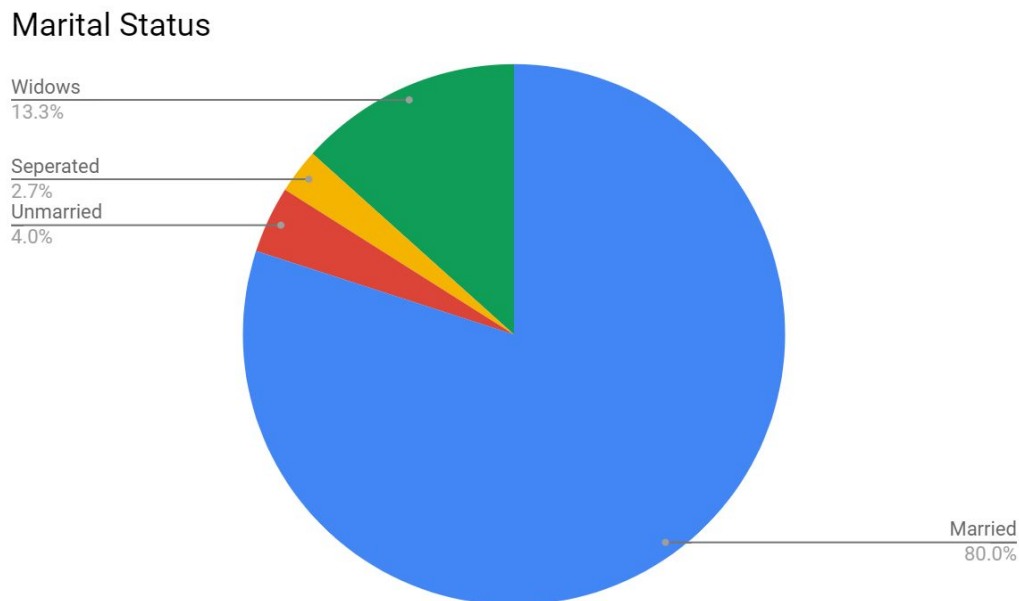
### Living Situation:

Of the 75 respondents, almost 95% respondents are living with family and only 4 respondents did not.



80% of the respondents are married, which forms the bulk of the group. 60 are married, 3 unmarried, 2 separated from husband, and 10 widows. All widows got a widows pension, which they were introduced to by the SSK (SEWA Shakti Kendra).

## Marital Status:



Almost all of those who were married said husband was out of work, only 3 respondents said husband worked during the lockdown which is why they had difficulties in making ends meet. Most women stated that it was important to be part of a double income household and that they had to work to keep it financially stable.

Most common reason for migration was income opportunities, closely followed by marriage and they migrated with either husband or after marriage with their family. Since migration was not included within the scope of study as a theme, there were no further questions asked. This will be addressed in subsequent work done on migration.

## Income:

On an average, the respondents work in 2.5 households. The average income comes to around 5600, but that is because there are some people who earn a lot more than this, they drove the number up. Relying on median salary shows us that most workers make around 3000/3500 per month.



Most respondents said that their salaries were decided by the employer (almost 65%). Only 10 women (15% of the sample) said they decided the wages and 15 women (21% of the sample) were employed via Sangini Patna, so the rate was fixed via consensus.



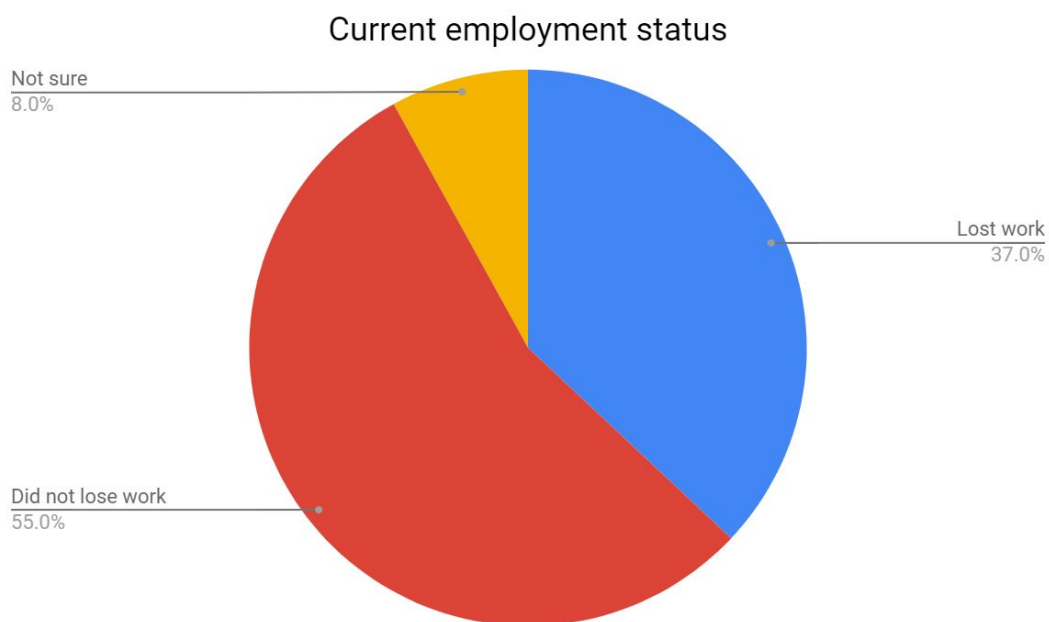
Only 13 respondents (20% of the respondents) got paid in May, around 21% got paid in April last and 50% got paid in March and did not get paid after that.



All the respondents said they had not taken up any alternative work to earn income in the lockdown. Some said that the market was closed, there was no work, some said they had an increased burden of household chores, some said they did not know what work they could do with their limited mobility and skill set.

### Job Security:

Only 28 respondents, (37% of the respondents) said that they were promised wages despite not being able to work during the lockdown, 28 respondents (37% of the respondents) said that they have lost work during the lockdown and 41 respondents (55% of the respondents) said that they had not lost any work during the lockdown, the others did not know if they would be called back or not.



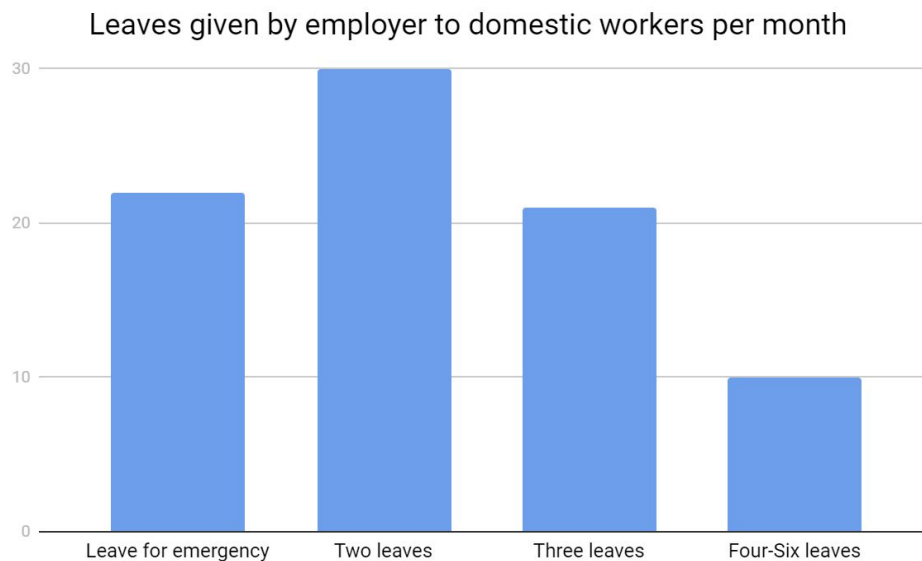
48 respondents, 64% of the respondents said that they are sure that they have been assured of job security after the lockdown is over. While not all of them were paid in the lockdown, but they were willing to go back to work to these houses when the lockdown ended.

Around 55% respondents (41 respondents) said that they had not discussed these issues (pertaining to income loss and job insecurity) with anyone till now, 15% respondents said they spoke about these issues with their neighbours, 20% respondents said they discussed them with other SEWA members.

## Leaves:

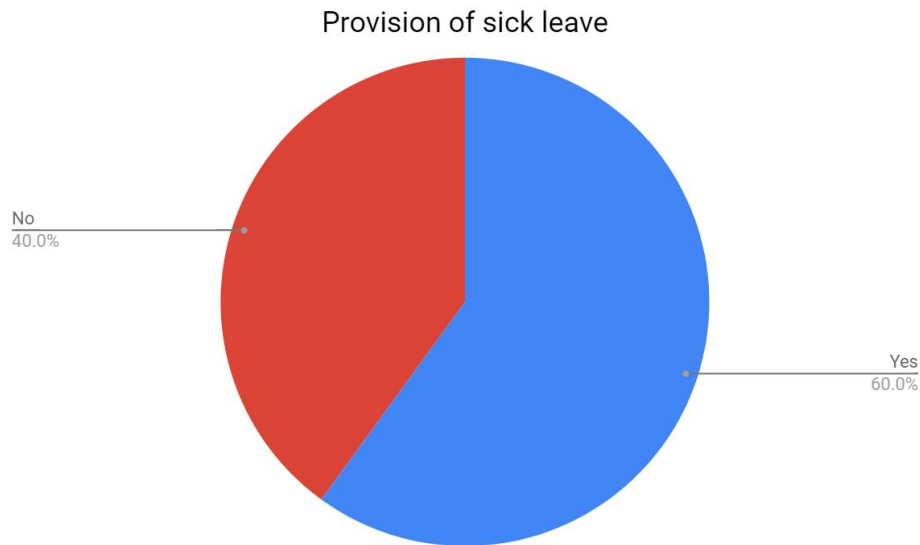
Almost 22% respondents said they don't get any leave unless emergency or sickness, 30% said they get 2 leaves, 21% said they get 3 leaves and 10% respondents get more than 4-6 leaves.

Those who did not get any leaves, said they get 1 or 2 when unwell but money is often deducted.



Around 33% of the respondents, (25 people) said their employers agreed easily to give leaves, 25% of the respondents, (18 people) said that their employers agreed with difficulty about leaves taken and 21% of the respondents (14 people) said their employers did not agree to give leaves at all.

Almost 60% of the respondents said they got sick leave and the others did not get sick leave. These people complained of salary deductions by the employers when unwell as well.



### Occupational Safety:

Around 80% of the respondents said they had not been called to work at all in the lockdown and 10% of the respondents started going to work only recently. Only one respondent said that they have been living with their employer and one respondent said she went to work throughout the lockdown.

The general trend picked up from the conversations with the respondents was that, they were aware about handwashing as a preventive measure and were practicing it, they also were using masks and if not masks then dupatta/scarves for protection while stepping out of their homes.

Very few respondents had sanitizers which they either purchased or got in aid. But, soap and water were something almost all respondents had access to.

As most domestic workers walk to work, and the roads are relatively empty right now, those who had to go to work or meet their employers reported that social distancing while commuting is not an issue. But they have said that they have not been able to practice social distancing while at work as they work in homes and it isn't possible for people to leave when they come for work.

### Social Security and Access to Welfare Schemes: Food Related

75% respondents had ration cards and of these 83% had ration cards issued for place of residence. Only 8 respondents (10% of the sample) said they had ration cards but did not get ration from PDS shops.

35% of the respondents said they got food aid in the lockdown, 10% got food supplies from their employer, around 30% got food from NGO/CSO/Person doing charity, 20% said they did not get any aid at all and almost all said that the food aid was free of cost

At least 75% respondents said there is a change in diet because of reduced incomes, the spillover effects of this would be visible in the coming times in the respondents as well as their children's health specially.

### Social Security and Access to Welfare Schemes: Finance Related

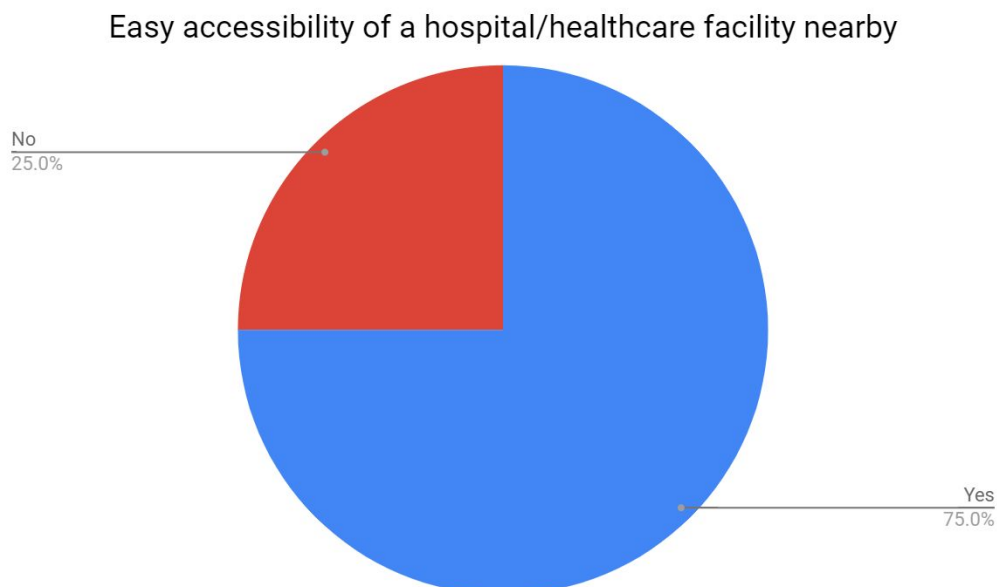
Around 65% people had Jan Dhan accounts, and of this 5% people did not get the 500 INR per month that was promised to them and 45% of this 65% were able to access this money easily.

There were 27% respondents of the sample had normal bank accounts, so they did not get Jan Dhan funds. This finding is extremely important as not all Jan Dhan account holders received the monetary benefit promised to them.

16% of the total respondents said they got some aid from the State, these responses were equally split between gas subsidy (not under Ujjwala) and widows pension.

### Social Security and Access to Welfare Schemes: Health Related

At least 75% respondents have a hospital nearby, the other 25% said the health facility is far from their home and incase of minor concerns they would prefer to take medicine from the pharmacy nearby.

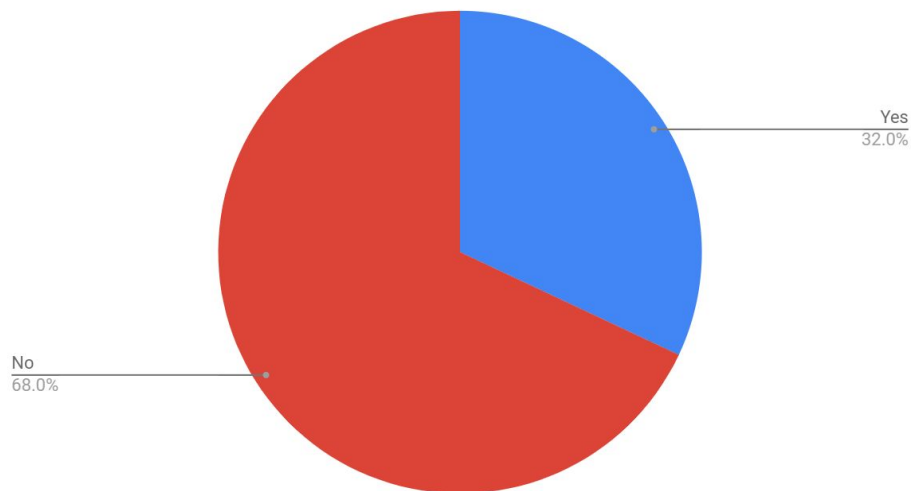


Of the sample, 10% respondents said that they have an ailment that they suffer from or an immediate family member suffers from that needs treatment/consultation but financial constraints are dissuading them from seeking treatment.

### Loans:

There were 24 respondents (32% of the sample) took loans during the lockdown, as they did not have any means to make ends meet. They also expressed a concern about the repayment of these loans in the light of extension of lockdown and spill over effect on their work.

Loans sought by the respondents during the lockdown



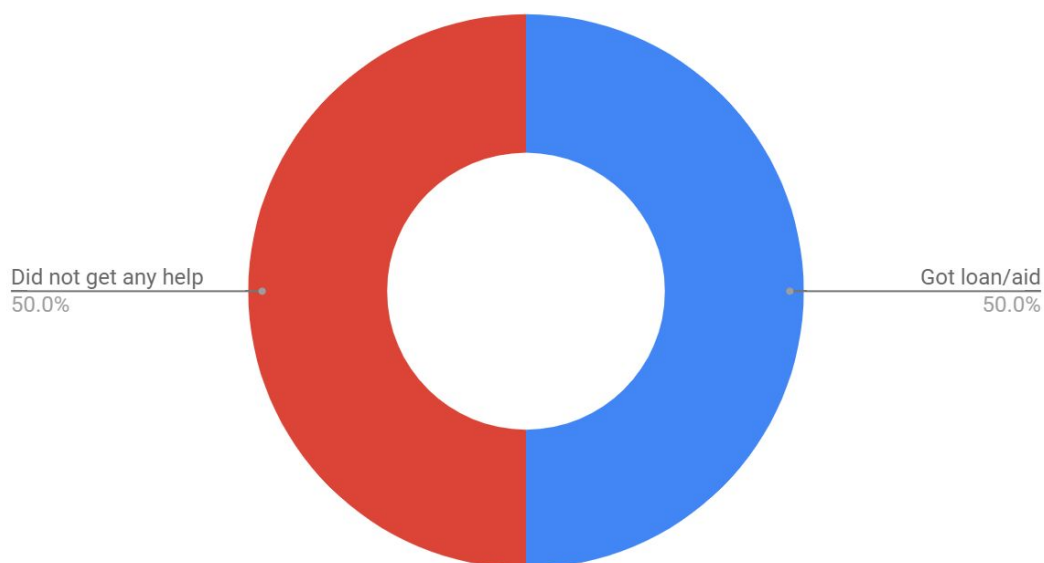
Of the loans sought, most people went to their neighbour, relative or friend for a loan as these loans are usually interest free and given on the basis of community goodwill.

Around 5% took loans from moneylenders and around 10% took loans from their employers. Only 2 respondents went to Self help Group (colloquially referred to as Samooh) for a loan.

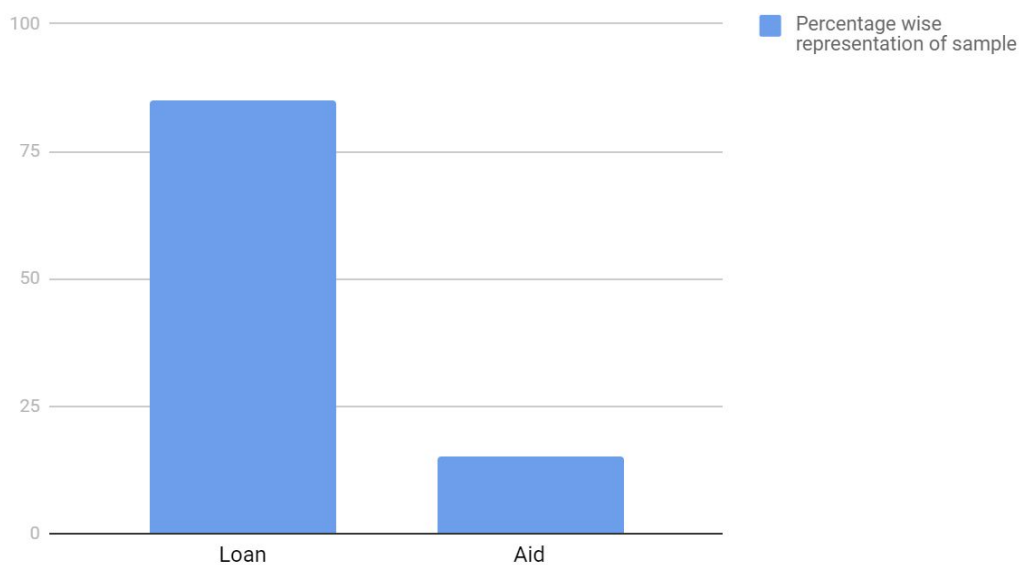
### *Monetary aid/loan from employer:*

Almost 50% respondents said that they got monetary help from employers when needed, and of this 50% only 15% got aid and the rest 85% got loans and the other 50% respondents did not get aid or loans at all.

### Monetary employer (loan/aid) from employer



### Representation of monetary support by employers



### Loss of Assets:

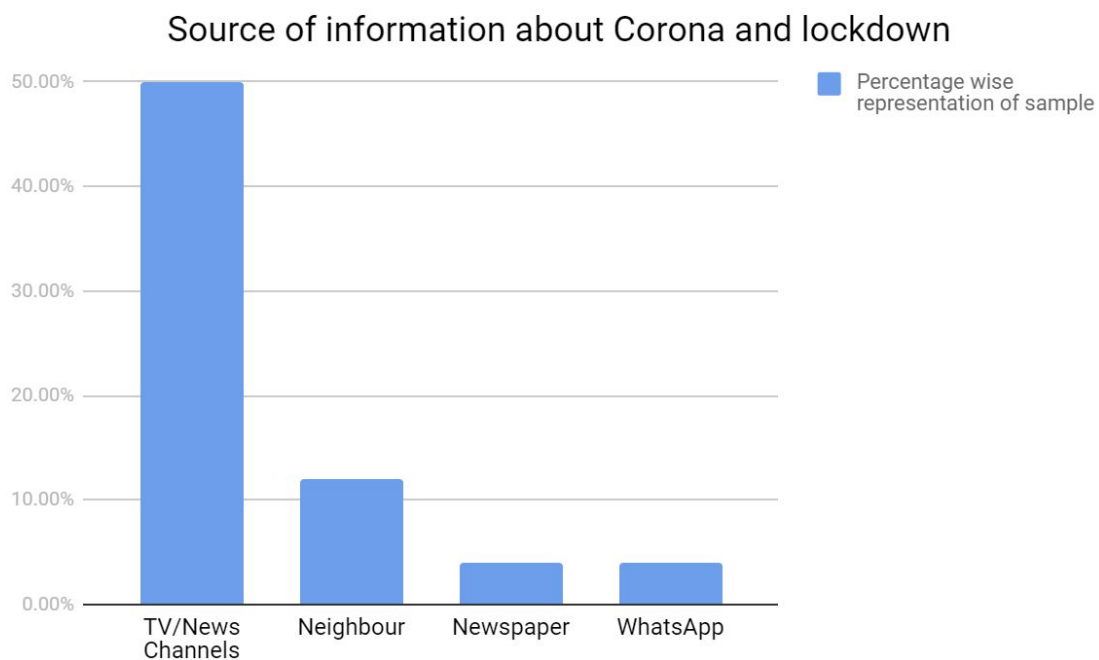
As there was reduced income and in some cases there was no income, the respondents and their families were facing a lot of financial hardship. 10% of the respondents sold their belongings or mortgaged them to manage expenses.

Of these 10% respondents, most said it was their jewellery that was pawned, one sold family TV and one said she sold a cell phone. The respondents said their incomes

were so low and did not have any increments, which made it difficult to save any money for a rainy day.

### Telecommunication, Information and Digital Services:

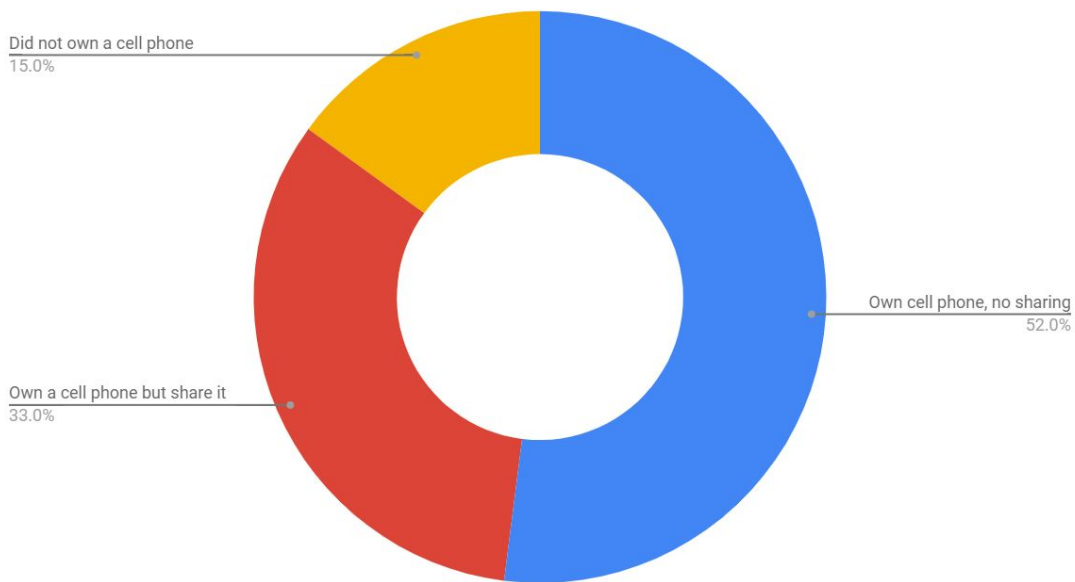
The most popular source for acquiring information about the pandemic was television. Around 50% respondents said they get information about corona from TV/news channels and around 12% said they get information from their neighbours. Less than 10% said they get information from family members and around 4% get information from newspapers and WhatsApp each respectively.



Around 85% respondents owned the cellphone we called them on and of these 33% said they had to share it with family and 15% of total respondents said the phone belonged to a family member.

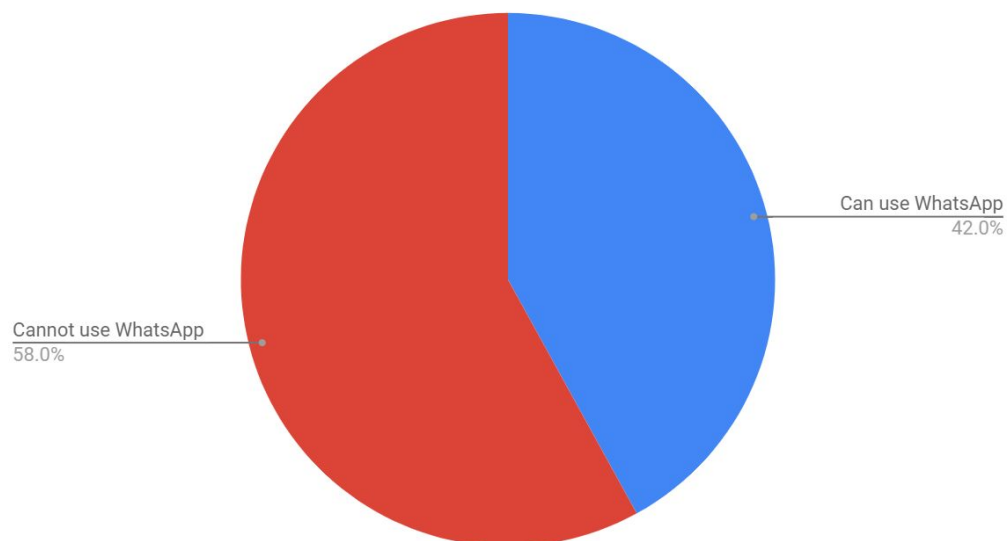


## Ownership of cell phone



While 42% of respondents said they could use WhatsApp but around 58% did not know how to use WhatsApp or used a feature phone.

## Usage of WhatsApp



And despite the public narrative to incentivise or push for digital payments. Only 1 respondent had used PhonePay for digital payments of household bills.

Surprisingly, none of the respondents had received their salary via digital means, and they stated that their employers generally prefer to pay the salaries in cash. These salaries are

mostly variable, they lie within a range and sometimes money is deducted for leaves or some additional money is paid for extra work.

## Conclusion:

It is imperative that tasks done by domestic workers are viewed as work and not as an extension of their domestic chores. Domestic workers should be entitled to rights as labour and not merely be included in welfare schemes due to their socio-economic disadvantages. An amalgamation of rights and welfare schemes will lead to their formal inclusion in the labour force, which has been long due and give them more opportunities for dignified employment. The domestic worker should be entitled to fair wages, working hours and leaves as their right and not something that is granted to them by one of their rare, merciful employers.

‘No society can survive without the massive contribution that domestic work makes to the national income. Yet it remains largely invisible and undervalued, a reflection of the low value India places on social reproduction’<sup>2</sup> There needs to be more awareness about the reality that domestic workers are vulnerable to abuse and have no bargaining power when it comes to their employers, they also do not have any safety net to ensure their basic well being. The disparity in the system and its flaws have only been exposed by the corona pandemic, they have not been caused by the pandemic. The legal and institutional frameworks which protect the rights and entitlements of domestic workers risk being rendered insignificant and irrelevant if there are no timely and effective redressal mechanisms that address the violations and atrocities caused to domestic workers.

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<sup>2</sup> Ghosh, J. (2014). Lecture on The Invisible Workers: Rights, Justice and Dignity for Domestic Workers. Retrieved from: <https://in.one.un.org/page/the-invisible-workers-rights-justice-and-dignity-for-domestic-workers/> accessed on 27 May 2020

## Appendix A: Survey Instrument for Domestic Workers

### 1. Introduction:

- a) Name
- b) State
- c) How are they holding up?

### 2. Background:

- a) Are you living with your family? If yes, then how many members are there in your family?
- b) Are you married? What does your husband do? Is he able to work in the lockdown? Who else in your family is working?
- c) Where is your native place?
- d) For how many years have you been living in 'current place of residence' ?
- e) If migrated, what was your main motivation for migration?
- f) Who did you migrate with?

### 3. Income and Job Security:

- a) How many houses do you work in?
- b) On an average, how much do you make in a month?
- c) How much do you get per household on an average?
- d) Has this rate been decided by you or the employer?
- e) How many off-days do you get in a month? Is this something you had to bargain for?
- f) Do your employers give you "sick leave"?
- g) Have your employers ever offered you monetary help in times of need?
- h) If yes, was it a loan or aid?
- i) When did you last receive a salary?
- j) Have any of your employers promised monthly wages despite you not being able to work due to Covid-19?
- k) If yes, how many of your employers have done so?
- l) Have you lost any employment during the lockdown? If yes, how many houses?
- m) Have your employers assured you of job security even after the pandemic is over? If yes, how many houses?
- n) Have you discussed these potential problems (of income loss and job insecurity) with others who do similar work?
- o) Have you taken up any alternative source of earning money during the lockdown?

### 4. Occupational Safety

- a) Have you been called to work in the lockdown?
- b) When did you last go to work?
- c) If during the lockdown period, do you wear masks to work?
- d) If yes, did you buy it or the employer?
- e) Do you wash hands before entering or upon entering all your employers houses?
- f) Do you wash your hands or sanitize immediately when you enter your own home as well?

- g) Do you have provision of running water and soap? If yes, did your employer provide you with any?
- h) Do you have provision of using a sanitizer? If yes, did your employer provide you with any?
- i) Are you able to practice social distancing at work?
- j) Are you able to practice social distancing while commuting to work?

5. Social Security & Access to Linkages:

- a) Do you know about the welfare board in your State? Are you registered under it? Have you benefited from the provisions of the welfare board? (only for states with welfare boards) Is the board doing anything for you during this lockdown?
- b) Do you have a ration card? Is it issued for “current place of residence”?
- c) Did you get any rations from PDS?
- d) Did you receive any food aid during the lockdown? Who all did you get food aid from? What kind of aid? Was it free or discounted?
- e) Is there a change in your diet in comparison to pre-covid?
- f) Do you have a bank account or a jan dhan account?
- g) Did you receive any money from the government during the lockdown?
- h) Were you able to access this money?
- i) Have you received any subsidy/pension/aid from the state before? For example under Ujjwala yojna?
- j) Are you able to easily access healthcare around you?
- k) Do you suffer from any ailment that needs attention? Are you able to get that during the lockdown?
- l) Have you taken a loan to manage your expenses during the lockdown?
- m) If yes, who did you take it from? What are the conditions for paying it back?

6. Loss of assets:

- a) Did you have to sell or mortgage any personal belongings (goat, jewellery etc) to manage expenses during the lockdown? Who did this belong to?
- b) If you have to sell assets after the lockdown, what would you sell? Who does that belong to?

7. Tele-Communication Services:

- a) Where do you get information about COVID from?
- b) Is this your phone? Do you share your phone with others? Do you get enough time on your phone? Can you use WhatsApp?
- c) Have you done a digital transaction before for example BHIM or Paytm?
- d) If yes, has your employer paid your wages digitally?



# Acknowledgements

## **Authors:**

Aiman Haque, [aiman.haque@sewabharat.org](mailto:aiman.haque@sewabharat.org)

Saba Ahmed, [saba@sewabharat.org](mailto:saba@sewabharat.org)

Vaishakhi Shah; [vaishakhi@sewabharat.org](mailto:vaishakhi@sewabharat.org)

**Email: [research@sewabharat.org](mailto:research@sewabharat.org)**

**Block 7, House 5, First Floor,  
South Patel Nagar,  
New Delhi, Delhi 110008**