

Migrant Workers Stranded Yet Again

PRESS RELEASE

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As the death toll and positivity rate in the wake of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic stays alarmingly high, lockdowns and other restrictions have been instituted in many parts of the country. Even though an announcement of a nationwide lockdown has not been made, work has been severely disrupted with calls for further [curtailment of non-essential economic activity](#). The brunt of the resulting distress has once more disproportionately impacted informal workers, including migrant workers and street vendors. Traumatized by the events of last year, workers have begun returning to the safety of their hometowns and villages. The journeys back home have not been without fatalities. In a grim replay of last year's tragedies, [three migrant workers were killed](#) when an overcrowded bus ferrying people from Delhi to Tikamgarh overturned. Many, however, remain stranded, without access to any social safety net.

As distress calls started trickling in, the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), which was set up last year to support migrant workers, has relaunched its efforts to help these workers and provide them with micro cash transfers to meet their basic needs. Further, given the extent of the health crisis, SWAN is also disseminating public health messages and underscoring the importance of vaccinations and the need to abide by COVID-19 protocols.

Since we resumed our efforts on 21st April 2021, 51 groups/families of workers (comprising approximately 300 people) have reached out. From an average of two calls in the first week, the number of calls per day has increased by threefold in the last three days alone. The increase may partly be a result of the word about relief assistance spreading, but is also indicative of the increasing distress, especially as lockdowns get extended or become tighter. This is more so for those who have chosen to stay back. Recognising that the calls we receive may not be an accurate assessment of distress, SWAN volunteers also proactively reached out to 92 workers who contacted us last year to check in with them and understand their current livelihood and health situation. A more detailed description of the types of distress and testimonies that workers shared with SWAN volunteers is in the attached note: ["Capturing the distress of workers in the COVID-19 second wave"](#).

Following is a summary of the workers' conditions, based on the volunteers' conversations with them:

- 81% of the workers we spoke to reported that work (daily and contractual) has stopped due to locally declared lockdowns. On average, workers reported that work had stopped for 19 days.
- We received calls from across the country, but many were from workers in states like Delhi, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh.
- 68% of workers (whom we spoke to) reported that they had received their full or partial wages for the previous month. However, only 18% had received any money from their employer since the work had stopped.
- Some workers have returned to their native villages, while others were unsure about whether they should go back or wait for work to resume. The inflated cost of travel has deterred many workers.
- Those who have stayed back in the cities face a shortage of money for essential needs like ration, room rent, etc. 76% reported that they needed ration and/or some limited cash support.
- Hearteningly, most migrants were not experiencing any serious COVID-19 related symptoms. However, many whom we also reached out to have not received vaccinations, which could be a function of age (most were below 45 years), but worryingly also because of vaccine hesitancy expressed by a few.

In his speech on 20th April, the Prime Minister (PM) urged migrant workers to stay where they are. Some Chief Ministers (CMs) have also made direct appeals, such as the Delhi CM, who assured migrant workers that they would be taken care of, saying "main hoon na". In terms of relief, so far the Union Government has announced an extension of Prime Minister Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) benefits to households with ration cards. While we welcome this move, the plight of migrant workers has once more been overlooked. Last year's experience demonstrates that such measures alone are insufficient. As per estimates by [Dreze, Khara and Mungikar](#), at least ten crore eligible beneficiaries do not have ration cards. In addition, many migrants do not carry their ration cards with them and cannot avail of benefits in the places to which they migrate. In a belated move last year, the Union Government was compelled to

announce free rations for eight crore migrant workers. Why not the same this year? Why was there a need for a [PIL to be filed in the Supreme Court](#) once again demanding assistance for migrant workers after the crisis last year?

Our initiative this past week has documented only a section of the distress of migrant workers and extended only a fraction of the support they need. However, we hope that in sharing their experience and continuing to collate their needs, we will be able to amplify their experiences of the lockdown and make the urgent case for supporting them in their hour of need. To this end, we would recommend the following:

1. Government must ensure the extension of free ration coverage as part of Prime Minister Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) to migrant workers.
2. Government must ensure that every primary employer strictly adheres to paying the wages to their contractors and the workers. The Labour Ministry should also immediately issue an order demanding payment of wages by employers even during lockdowns/curfews.
3. Immediately add additional funds for NREGA and increase the entitlement to 200 days per household. Some workers have been hesitant to work owing to fear of the virus. Ensure small, sanitised work groups keeping physical distancing norms, failing which, the government must pay the full wages for the period.
4. Provision of travel assistance should be made for stranded migrant workers from non-neighbouring states who wish to return home.
5. Labour Welfare Boards should pay collected cess to all registered construction workers.
6. Wage compensation of Rs. 7000/- for the next three months should be provided to all priority households/migrant workers.
7. No eviction of tenants by landlords for inability to pay rent. Like last year, orders must be issued to this effect.
8. Prioritise vaccination of migrant workers returning to their home states.

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