# The Impact of COVID-19 on India's Internal Migration

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**Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic left India's social and economic identity trembling with the majority of its brunt being borne by the downtrodden and migrant populations of India. Experts have reported that the sheer scale of the problem at hand could easily be one the largest migration crises India has ever faced with estimates of up to 400 million workers being unable to afford basic necessities (Nair & Verma, 2020). This research study aims to investigate and outline the contributing factors of this crisis by analyzing the overarching impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indian society since the pandemic's inception. This will be done by specializing data sources and analysis in three foundational aspects: (a) mental health, (b) gender gap, and (c) caste & socioeconomic barriers. The methodology will consist of primary and secondary data sources which when implemented effectively will paint a holistic picture of the adversities and obstacles faced by the migrant laborers. The study's ultimate aim is to provide comprehensive analysis of the effects of government policies on migrants in India and to suggest detailed reforms in order to create an improved environment for the internal migrants in the country. Utilizing the results of the data analysis and its inferences, we suggest both short-term, and long-term solutions to this rapidly deteriorating migration crisis including: government distribution of COVID-19 vaccinations, providing wage support for migrant workers, and the building of a stronger framework to allow for safer migration throughout the country. Considering the implications and limitations of this research as universal inapplicability of potential solutions continue to persist in political scenarios due to corruption and politicize agendas, the paper discusses how current foundational elements within India can be strengthened in order to better favor the lives of the migrant workers therefore increasing the overall sustainability of the entire Indian workforce and economy.

Categories: COVID-19, Migration, India
Keywords: Migrant Workers, Migrant Crisis, Informal Economy, Government Policies

## Background

The term ‘migrant’ can include a large variety of individuals, from immigrants/emigrants to refugees and asylum seekers, to people who migrate internally (within their country of residence), often due to employment-related reasons. Of the latter, migration tends to be from rural to rural, urban to urban, or rural to urban areas — a category of people no less diverse than where we started from. Migrants who travel internally come from different backgrounds, with equally different futures ahead of them. The most marginalized of the lot (henceforth referred to simply as ‘migrant workers’) are those who hail from rural areas and travel in the hope of financial and social mobility, finding work in both organized and unorganized sectors, with the latter especially being a woefully underpaying and harsh workplace. This invisible, yet by no means insignificant, chunk of the labour force was in dire straits as the entire country stayed home in lieu of a pandemic— except them.

*Metrics of Movement: Measuring Migration*

Before examining why things unfolded the way they did, it is first important to understand the historical patterns of migration in India, how it is measured, and how it has changed.

The Census, held every ten years, and the National Sample Survey Office’s migration surveys, held every five years, define internal migration in two possible ways: a person residing in a place other than their place of birth, or a person residing in a place other than their usual place of residence (UPR). Depending on whether the Place of Birth definition, the UPR definition, or both are used, the number of migrants found would differ. Additionally, another core metric is the amount of time a person has spent away from place of birth or UPR. In light of that, migration can be permanent, semi-permanent (also known as long term circular), seasonal, or circular migration. The latter two tend to occur for short periods of time and thus whether these workers fit the definition of migrant is incumbent upon where they are living at the time of the survey. Lastly, whether a household has completely relocated to a different place or only has one or more out-migrating individuals also makes a difference (Indian Council of Social Science Research, 2011).

Migrants are classified according to the stream of migration, i.e., intra-district, inter-district, or interstate. Each category further includes numbers for rural-rural, rural-urban, urban-rural and urban-urban migration. In both the surveys, respondents self-report their reasons for migration. For men - the primary reason is found to be employment, and marriage for women; however, it should be noted that many women, while relocating due to marriage, often immediately enter into employment after migrating (Rajan et. al., 2020). Urbanization can be considered to be at the core of migration. Migration to urban areas has increased, especially for men in rural areas, as informal and unorganized working sectors have been expanding in cities. However, at the same time, rising cost of living has pushed migrant workers to the margins. Additionally, the contribution of these migrants to rural economies in the form of money transfers to family back home still remains low (Chandrasekhar and Sharma, 2015).

*A Pandemic and a Lockdown, both unannounced*

One the eve of March 24, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a nation-wide lockdown starting March 25th, 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, giving the entire nation just 4 hours’ notice to prepare for the next 21 days. The status of migrant workers quickly went from bad to worse as they began to head towards their hometowns en masse. The Stranded Workers Action Network, founded in light of the crisis, became one of the many groups volunteering to help migrant workers reach home safely. Over the course of 4 reports, SWAN documented their interactions and findings with distressed migrant workers in various states. The first report, documenting the first 21 days of the lockdown, saw a near immediate exodus of migrants, trying to get home in an atmosphere of intense uncertainty and fear (Stranded Workers Action Network, 2020). They found themselves without much in the way of work, transportation, money, food, and running out of food faster than the government was providing aid and rations. The combined efforts of government aid and local volunteer organisations could not match up to the large number of workers who were hungry, penniless, or both.

Food and cash were, thus, the biggest concerns for stranded migrant workers. Some received rations but had no means to cook them; others stood in long lines at feeding centers set up by the government, which would run out of food before everyone could be helped, or were harassed by the police for being outside while trying to reach these centers; few had the money to buy supplies at any grocery shop that they could find.

On 29th March, the Ministry of Home Affairs announced that employers must pay their workers full wages, but implementation was sparse at best. Similarly, legislative precedent such as the Interstate Migrant Worker Act (1979) and the Street Vendors Act (2014) and other such laws did little to improve the material conditions of these workers. Specific schemes such as a financial package announced by the finance minister for construction workers sound helpful on the surface, but they required registration with welfare boards, which most of the workers did not possess due to a variety of reasons (Yadav, 2020). But perhaps the most important thing that the government neglected to offer in its relief efforts was dignity, as pointed out by Kannan (2020). Welfare schemes in both rural and urban areas fail them due to improper or lack of documentation and other eligibility criteria. Flimsy policies that are too poorly implemented to pass any real test of their use— such as a pandemic— and are accessible to only a miniscule percentage of the largest category of workers in a nation, afford neither material aid nor respect to the people they supposedly serve. Deserted in the city, wanting to go home, or deserted on the streets, trying to get home, which is better? In both cases there is a convergence of multiple vulnerability factors: food and financial insecurity, malfunctioning or non-existent social welfare and safety nets, unemployment, and inadequate healthcare services. The next report, just over 30 days into the lockdown, found that little had improved for the migrants (Stranded Workers Action Network, 2020). It criticized the lack of urgency and proper implementation of relief efforts on part of the central government. The initial lockdown was supposed to last 21 days. It was extended thrice, until it was lifted on the first of June and the 'Unlock' phases began. Now, a year and a second wave later, some migrant workers have returned or travelled again in search of work, the risk of unemployment more lethal than the risk of disease.

## Methodology

Our objectives in this study are to: (a) measure the deviations visible in historic migration patterns due to lockdowns and restrictions, (b) understand the causative factors of migration, (c) assess the impact of the pandemic on the living conditions of migrant workers, and (d) recommend solutions and policies to alleviate the migration crisis. Owing to the complexity of analyzing large scale social phenomena, it is essential to use a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative data. In addition to the use of secondary sources, we also conducted our own surveys asking migrant workers about their current living conditions. This approach not only allows us to analyze vast swaths of data from sources like the Census and International Labour Organisation but also lets us view the migrant crisis through their unique perspectives as well. Furthermore, the analysis of our primary data surveys helps provide a uniquely deeper understanding of the larger research problem owing to their proximity and first-hand experience of the entire ordeal.

As part of the study, we interviewed migrant workers hailing from a variety of places in India, but had ultimately settled in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra owing to their proximity to industrial units and manufacturing companies. These laborers came from small villages and cities such as Ratlam, Goregaon, Kalyan, etc. Interviews were either conducted in person or over the telephone based on the questionnaire that we developed. The responses enabled us to gain a better understanding of the living conditions of migrant workers, and to get more honest and unadulterated opinions on certain issues like government policies and relief schemes. Our primary data surveys constituted the backbone of our research and analysis, while secondary data sources complemented these findings and provided a comprehensive and quantitative element to the overarching conclusions of the paper. The responses were further visualized using histograms, bar graphs, choropleth maps, and frequency tables to effectively communicate their inferences.

**Data Interpretation and Analysis**

Section I: An Overview of Migration Trends in India

The 2011 Census data on internal migration found that about 450 million people migrated throughout India, making up 37.7% of the total population (Registrar General of India, 2011). According to reasonable estimates, the Indian migrant population in 2020 would reach almost 600 million if historical trends continued along with the various urbanization and migration programmes implemented by the government. There are an estimated 200 million intrastate and interstate migrants in India, of which two-thirds are migrant workers, leaving us with an estimate of approximately 140 million migrant workers in 2020 (Gupta, 2020).

Upon further analysis, the vast majority of internal migrants in India are short-distance intra-district migrants in search of work, accounting for almost 62% of the migrant worker population (Registrar General of India, 2011). When compared to other developing countries such as Brazil and China, interstate migrants make up only 12% of the migrant worker population. Existing research points to a lack of social security and safety nets available to the migrant population essentially placing a bottleneck on their opportunities for upward economic and social mobility (Grover et al., 2020).

Historical trends of internal migration demonstrate a unique scenario where the percentage share of male migrants is diminishing in rural areas, whereas it remains constant in urban areas (Figure 1). The decrease in male migration in rural areas is widely recognized as a consequence of the various employment schemes implemented by the Indian government, such as the NREGA and PMRY (Mahapatro, 2020). These programs guarantee the right to work, reducing the need for rural males to migrate long distances for employment.

As a result, although male migration rates have stagnated, female migration rates have substantially increased (Figure 1). Although historical studies attribute female migration primarily to marriage, contemporary studies have revealed that they are instead driven by economic factors (Rajan & Neetha, 2019). We explore these patterns of gender disparities further in Section II.

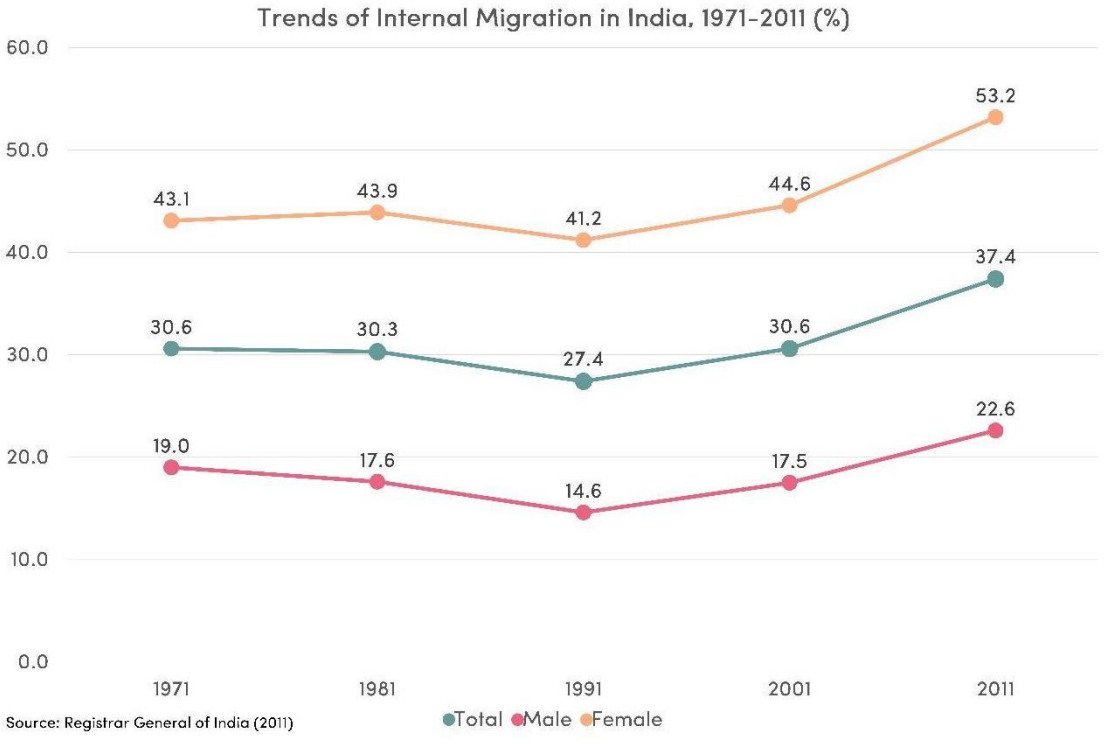


Figure 1

The vast majority of migrant workers are seasonal migrants hailing from marginalized communities. The seasonal nature of their work combined with their marginalized status make the migrant worker population among the most vulnerable demographics in India. Furthermore, the lack of consistent and comprehensive data on migrants significantly impairs policy-making and legislation.

Section II: The Narrative of Gender Disparities

India's internal migration is largely driven by either economic reasons or by distress-induced movements (Bhatt, 2009). These trends have been analyzed primarily on the basis of causal factors, completely overlooking gender issues and societal norms. It was commonly believed that migration was primarily a male-driven movement, with women following as dependents (Registrar General of India, 2011; Rajan et al., 2021; Figure 2). A generalization like this is an inherent reason for the lack of comprehensive data on female migrants, which severely impedes policies meant to level the playing field among the migrant population.

Recent studies have shown that although women cite marriage as the primary reason for migration, a statistically significant percentage of the women migrants begin working immediately and take part in the new economic environment (Agnihotri et al., 2012). On the flipside of attributing women as dependent followers of migration is its correlation with domestic violence (Bhatt, 2009). Recent studies have shown that women who move to a new place to get married feel vulnerable and isolated. As a result, women are often exploited because of their limited access to family and lack of mobility (Puskur & Mohan, 2020).

Reason for Migration, 2007-08 (% of Female Migrants)

| | Work | Marriage | Education |
|---|---|---|---|
| Andhra Pradesh (United) | 5.72 | 51.06 | <1 |
| Arunachal Pradesh | 3.16 | 40.39 | <1 |
| Assam | 6.57 | 47.14 | <1 |
| Bihar | 4.11 | 49.28 | <1 |
| Karnataka | 5 | 41.6 | <1 |
| Kerala | 9.17 | 36.76 | <1 |
| Chhattisgarh | 8.93 | 57.7 | <1 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 4.04 | 49.51 | <1 |
| Goa | 5.09 | 53.38 | <1 |
| Gujarat | 2.99 | 50.94 | <1 |
| Haryana | 2.15 | 68.76 | <1 |
| Himachal Pradesh | 3.32 | 53.18 | <1 |
| Jammu and Kashmir | 3.32 | 35.88 | <1 |
| Jharkhand | 4.09 | 70.06 | <1 |
| West Bengal | 4.48 | 63 | <1 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 4.12 | 65.44 | <1 |
| Maharashtra | 3.67 | 52.9 | <1 |
| Manipur | 12.36 | 23.22 | <1 |
| Meghalaya | 4.87 | 50.25 | <1 |
| Mizoram | 4.15 | 12.91 | <1 |
| Nagaland | 4.82 | 37.24 | <1 |
| Orissa | 6.11 | 57.76 | <1 |
| Punjab | 3.15 | 59.99 | <1 |
| Rajasthan | 2.86 | 60.14 | <1 |
| Sikkim | 4.29 | 56.55 | <1 |
| Tamil Nadu | 7.23 | 44.42 | <1 |
| Tripura | 2.84 | 54.53 | <1 |
| Uttarakhand | 3.07 | 55.75 | <1 |
| Delhi | 3.98 | 45.94 | <1 |

Source: NSSO (2007 – 2008)

Figure 2

In some districts of North India, brides are often brought in from other states for the sole purpose of marriage, resulting in a cycle of cultural isolation and domestic violence. The pandemic and the consequent lockdowns only served as to further exacerbate the problem of discrimination against women migrants (Figure 3). Studies have shown that almost a quarter of all female workers lost their jobs just two months into the lockdown and have concluded that the upcoming global recession will have a significantly disproportionate impact on loss of jobs for women and thus, continue to widen the gender pay gap (Rukmini, 2020).

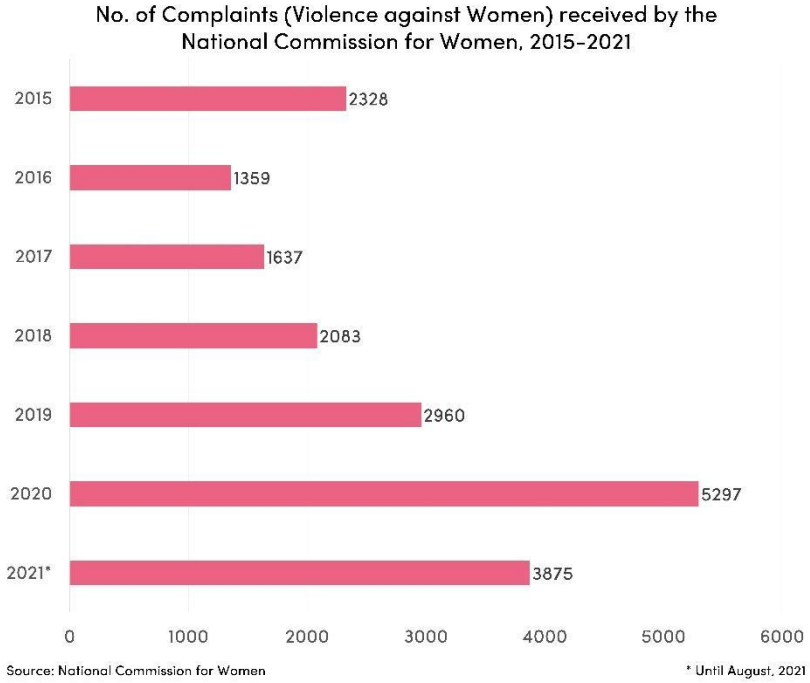


Figure 3

In order for us to analyze the causative factors of migration and its subsequent on female migrants specifically, we must first categorize three overarching scenarios (Rajan et al., 2020). They are as follows: (a) women who were "left-behind", (b) single women migrant laborers, and (c) women who migrated with their spouses and children.

As a result of the preconceived notion that women are dependent followers of migration, women belonging to the first two categories receive little to no attention in studies analyzing the effects of migration. The majority of men who migrate in search of better employment opportunities leave their spouses and children behind in their native areas. The prevalence of these scenarios is so prominent in rural areas that women have started to lead an increasingly greater number of households in the last few decades. However, this also adds a great deal of responsibility to the women both inside and outside of their homes, forcing them to often take on additional jobs to maintain financial stability. As a result, these women are not eligible for governmental assistance and welfare programs (Rai, 2020). Additionally, women who have managed to overcome the antiquated gender norms of Indian society in order to find employment through migration are also seen as bystanders in the discourse surrounding gender issues in migration (Ghatak, 2020). This category includes a significant population ranging from domestic workers and low-level construction helpers all the way to waitresses and sales girls (Sapra, 2020). The job security in these industries and sectors are already poor, and it has continued to deteriorate even further during the pandemic. Having little to no support system and safety nets in place for such women migrants, these women migrants were forced back to

their native areas, completely negating all the effort they put into escaping the poverty back home.

The only category being presented in popular media and discourse is that of women who migrated with their spouses and children in search of work. A significant lack of centralized support systems forced these migrants to make arduous journeys home with little to no assistance. Some of the women died on the way, while others gave birth without medical attention but almost everyone continued on their journeys back home. The extensive coverage of these incidents by news channels and media firms caused significant uproar in the following months (Pandey, 2020). News footage and pictures of tens of thousands of migrants making their way back home in crowded trains and roads dominated the news cycles of last year. At one point, these reports drew substantial criticism on international forums, forcing the Government of India to take immediate action to try and stop the migrant crisis from worsening any further. Among the impacts of this particular category is the undeniable effect it will have on the children's future. In the absence of social safety nets and adequate education, these children will most likely be forced to engage in child labor, continuing the brutal cycle of misery (Rajan et al., 2020).

The vast majority of discourse surrounding gender wage inequality has been predominantly focused on the rural-urban divide and the causative factors leading to such a scenario. However, recent studies have now started to utilize principles of intersectionality to investigate underlying causes of gender wage gaps within the internal migrant population of India with Sharma & Das (2015) concluding:

> Our preliminary finding is that there is the presence of both sticky floor and glass-ceiling effect observed for urban migrants as compared to the non-migrants. The coefficient effect is due to discrimination in the labor market. We find positive significant effect all thorough the distributional wage gap.

These inferences correspond with existing literature highlighting the fact that women are primarily concentrated in the primary sector and in lower-paying jobs which follows the analysis on historical migration trends provided in Section I (Figure 4).

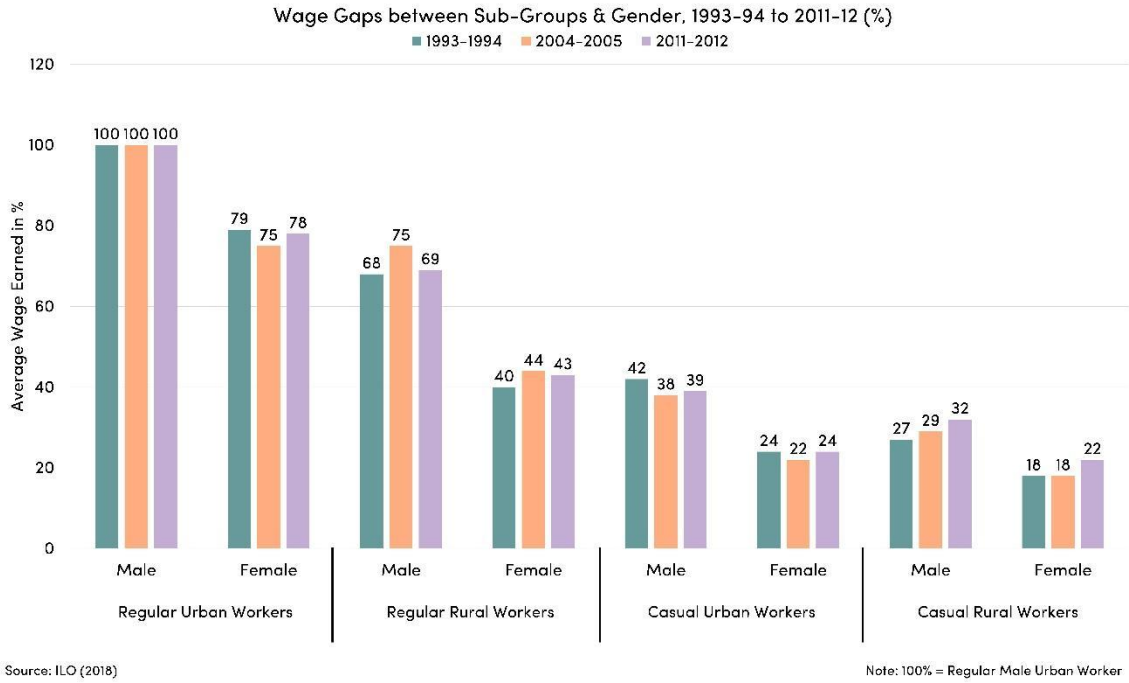


Figure 4

Contemporary studies have concluded that the prevalence of antiquated social norms help turn the labor market against women leading them to possess a lower bargaining power in the economy (ILO, 2018; Joshi & Kumra, 2018). Furthermore, occupations such as domestic work engages a significant population of these women migrants. Joshi & Kumra (2018) noted that:

> This paper showed that for all categories of employment, considerable wage differentials prevailed in both rural and urban areas. Women are not only concentrated in low-paying occupations in the unorganized sector and casual work - they are also subject to discrimination in wage payments irrespective of their educational attainments.

Migration, regardless of its cause, has always had a disproportionately adverse impact on women with regards to exploitation and discrimination (Bhatt, 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic serves as to only highlight these cracks in existing institutions and further aggravate them. A rise in domestic violence, gender wage gaps and bonded labor are only a small part of the myriad of problems contributing to the plight of women migrants.

Section III: The Mental Health Crisis

Mental well-being has historically been a taboo and stigmatized topic in Indian society. Existing research has already established that mental health problems are more prevalent among single, unskilled daily wage workers and hence, it would be reasonable to assume that the effects of COVID-19 have exacerbated these preexisting mental health issues (Firdaus, 2017; Figure 5). Psychosocial factors, such as absence of family support, social exclusion and lack of access to psychiatric services are considered to be major determinants of the increased psychological distress present among internal migrant workers (Choudhari, 2020). These factors, coupled with the fact that a significant population of migrant workers had lost their income sources, rendering them unable to meet their basic needs, only worsened the already precarious situation. Additionally, the lack of a unified policy by the government of India and its consequent treatment of migrants as scapegoats have resulted in a significant deterioration of public trust, which has already been noted to negatively affect access to healthcare (Singh et al., 2020; Gille et al., 2014).

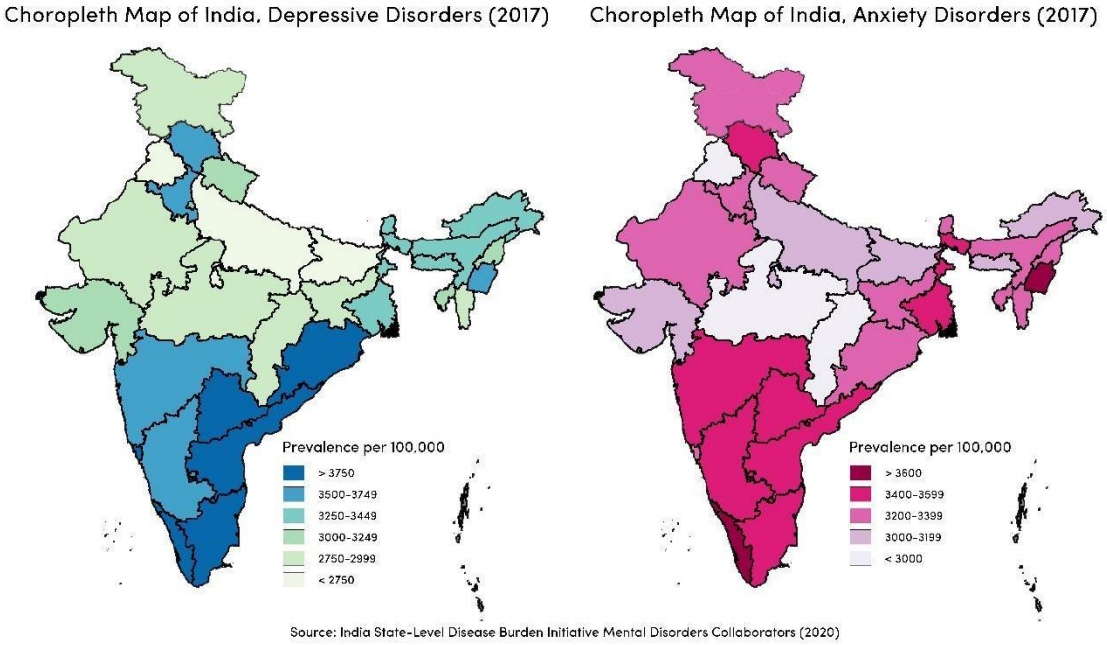


Figure 5

A press release from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare at the beginning of this pandemic highlighted the urgent need for improved mental healthcare access for the migrant population. In an increasingly volatile environment, it emphasized the need to treat migrants with respect and dignity and requested state governments and organisations to help such marginalized communities whenever possible. The first lockdown of 25th March was met with immediate action by state governments, which offered counselling sessions and basic necessities such as shelter and food (Tiwary, 2020). NGOs, youth-led programmes, and civil societies with the mission of providing resources and educating the public about mental health problems were formed to fill the void left by government policies. Alas, these measures would be trivial compared to the realities of the mental health crisis that was ravaging the nation as the lack of a centralized policy targeting mental health severely hindered the creation of a uniform standard of care across the nation. Widespread reports of police aggression, inefficient logistics in transportation, mistreatment and a general sense of apathy among institutions all played their part in actively destroying any semblance of mental fortitude left among the migrant population. Numerous studies utilizing cross-sectional surveys all reported a surge in depression and anxiety among migrant workers during the onset of the lockdown (Choudhari, 2020). Furthermore, instances of significant positive correlations have been found between circumstances such as poverty, inequality, and financial debt and common mental disorders with Singh (2020) highlighting the following:

> Social inequalities between different social groups in terms of gender, education, race, income, language, customs and traditions, and areas of residence are consistently associated with common mental disorders. Migrant laborers due to their unique and disadvantageous position are particularly vulnerable to all these risk factors.

While, Grover et al. (2020) concluded:

> About three fourth of the participants (73.5%) were found to be screen positive for depression on the PHQ-2 and about half of the participants (50%) were found to be screen positive for anxiety on the GAD-2). On PSS-4, the mean score on the PSS was 7.1 (2.3). (PHQ-2: Patient Health Questionnaire-2; GAD-2: Generalized Anxiety Disorder-2; PSS-4: Perceived Stress Scale-4)

According to recent studies, the mishandling of the pandemic and its consequent impact on the migrant population will have significant ramifications for the pre-existing migration patterns in India. Arguably, this is a result of the migrant population and their mental health having a significantly disproportionate impact compared to other demographics (Choudhari, 2020). It is reasonable to assume, given the tragic circumstances that the migrant workers experienced during the pandemic, that they are unlikely to return to cities in search of employment, instead choosing to stay in their native areas where they can enjoy relative comfort, convenience, and access to support systems. Furthermore, as programs like NREGA and PMRY continue to gain steam in rural areas, migrants would be less inclined to migrate in search of employment, further changing current migration patterns.

Due to the severity of the pandemic, the majority of the brunt of the lockdowns and restrictions were borne by the internal migrant population in India and consequently, suffered a disproportionate impact on their mental health. As a result, an increase in mental health problems combined with the stigma of mental health in contemporary Indian society and the lack of access to mental healthcare facilities led to the creation of one of the worst mental health crises seen in India (Singh, 2020).

Section IV: The Impact on Living Conditions of Internal Migrants due to COVID-19

Migrants, due to their range of vulnerabilities are at a much higher chance of being disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development, 2020). These vulnerabilities range from higher instances of poverty and overcrowded housing conditions all the way to negative labor market trends during the economic recession. It is therefore imperative to document these changes in relation to their standards before the announcement of lockdowns. As discussed in Section I, the lack of reliable data and comprehensive data about the population of domestic migrants resulted in the Indian government being woefully inept at anticipating the needs of this particular group.

One of the most alarming points of contention surrounding the Indian labor market is the unusually high concentration in the informal sector with estimates by recent studies reaching up to 90% of the Indian workforce (Roy et al., 2020). Government labor surveys correspond with such conclusions and go on to state that more than 71% of the workers with a regular salary working in a non-agricultural sector have no written job contract. These statistics illustrate the precarious situation that migrant workers and informal workers have found themselves in over the past few decades without much intervention. The fact that most migrants live hand to mouth, combined with their lack of access to social welfare schemes, makes them particularly vulnerable to policies such as lockdowns and restrictions which would cause them to lose their only source of livelihood. In turn, this would have a direct and immediate impact on their ability to pay rent, buy food, and access healthcare; all of which considered basic necessities.

On the onset of the pandemic, the Indian Government initiated the largest lockdown in the world on March, 2020 severely affecting people's daily lives, their access to healthcare and most importantly, their source of income. Vulnerable demographics like the migrant population were immediately put in a disadvantageous position with all forms of transportation, healthcare institutions, educational institutions and industrials units closing down - rendering them virtually stranded in a completely foreign place with no income or assistance.

In this section, we examine the aftermath of such hasty announcements of lockdowns and restrictions and the impact it had on the living conditions of migrant workers. Specifically, we will be exploring the following areas: (a) employment & income, and (b) food security.

*Employment and Income*

**Figure 6**

| Occupation | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brick Kiln Worker | 1 | 2.000 | 2.000 | 2.000 |
| Carpenter | 6 | 12.000 | 12.000 | 14.000 |
| Construction Helper | 2 | 4.000 | 4.000 | 18.000 |
| Construction Worker | 21 | 42.000 | 42.000 | 60.000 |
| Delivery Person | 1 | 2.000 | 2.000 | 62.000 |
| Domestic Worker | 3 | 6.000 | 6.000 | 68.000 |
| Electrician | 1 | 2.000 | 2.000 | 70.000 |
| IT Staff | 1 | 2.000 | 2.000 | 72.000 |
| Mechanical Fitter | 2 | 4.000 | 4.000 | 76.000 |
| Tailor | 9 | 18.000 | 18.000 | 94.000 |
| Truck Driver | 1 | 2.000 | 2.000 | 96.000 |
| Waste Collector | 1 | 2.000 | 2.000 | 98.000 |
| Construction Supervisor | 1 | 2.000 | 2.000 | 100.000 |
| Missing | 0 | 0.000 | | |
| Total | 50 | 100.000 | | |

Source: Primary Data Surveys

Migrant workers were faced with a predicament as nationwide lockdowns and restrictions began to be imposed. They could either make treacherous journeys back home or attempt to survive in unknown cities and towns without any help or guidance. Regardless of their choices,

this situation ended up pushing the vast majority of the migrants to extreme despair, homelessness, poverty, and hunger. At this junction, it is also worth noting that migrants who chose to return back home further exacerbated the joblessness crisis, with Mohanty (2020) concluding:

> The rural economy was not designed to absorb local labour. Therefore, the root of the migrant labour crisis lay in the lack of employment opportunities in rural India, which must be restructured with vastly diversified productive activities to absorb local labour.

**Figure 7**

| Monthly Income | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10,000 - 14,999 | 20 | 40.000 | 40.000 | 40.000 |
| 15,000 - 19,999 | 15 | 30.000 | 30.000 | 70.000 |
| 5,000 - 9,999 | 8 | 16.000 | 16.000 | 86.000 |
| < 5,000 | 1 | 2.000 | 2.000 | 88.000 |
| > 19,999 | 6 | 12.000 | 12.000 | 100.000 |
| Missing | 0 | 0.000 | | |
| Total | 50 | 100.000 | | |

Source: Primary Data Surveys

**Figure 8**

| Did the Covid-19 lockdown affect your income? | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| No | 9 | 18.000 | 18.000 | 18.000 |
| Yes | 41 | 82.000 | 82.000 | 100.000 |
| Missing | 0 | 0.000 | | |
| Total | 50 | 100.000 | | |

Source: Primary Data Surveys

**Figure 9**

| Were you worried about running out of money during the lockdown? | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| No | 9 | 18.000 | 18.000 | 18.000 |
| Yes | 41 | 82.000 | 82.000 | 100.000 |
| Missing | 0 | 0.000 | | |
| Total | 50 | 100.000 | | |

Source: Primary Data Surveys

**Figure 10**

| Do you have the resources to plan for a potential third wave/lockdown? | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| No | 41 | 82.000 | 82.000 | 82.000 |
| Yes | 9 | 18.000 | 18.000 | 100.000 |
| Missing | 0 | 0.000 | | |
| Total | 50 | 100.000 | | |

Source: Primary Data Surveys

**Figure 11**

| Variable | | Did the Covid-19 lockdown affect your income? | Were you worried about running out of money during the lockdown? |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Did the Covid-19 lockdown affect your income? | Pearson's r | — | |
| | p-value | — | |
| 2. Were you worried about running out of money during the lockdown? | Pearson's r | 0.593 | — |
| | p-value | < .001 | — |

Source: Primary Data Surveys

Although limited by the total sample size, our survey corresponds with existing cross-sectional surveys conducted by other organizations. 82% of the respondents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns impacted their income, resulting in an equally substantial percentage of respondents being concerned about running out of money and being unable to afford basic necessities. Using regression analysis tests, the correlation between the responses to (Q. 12) "Did the COVID-19 lockdown affect your income?" and (Q. 13) "Were you worried about running out of money during the lockdown?" is statistically significant with a Pearson's R-value of 0.593 and a p-value of less than 0.001 (Figure 11). This inference however leads us to another problem - Figures 8 and 9 show the same frequency of positive and negative responses and thus, we must now determine whether the same respondents responded either positively or negatively to both of these questions. Upon further analysis, that doesn't seem to be the case. The variation between these responses lies within the upper brackets of relative income eventually leading to two scenarios: (a) where their income was affected but they weren't worried about running out of money, or (b) where their income wasn't affected nor were they worried about running out of money (Figure 7).

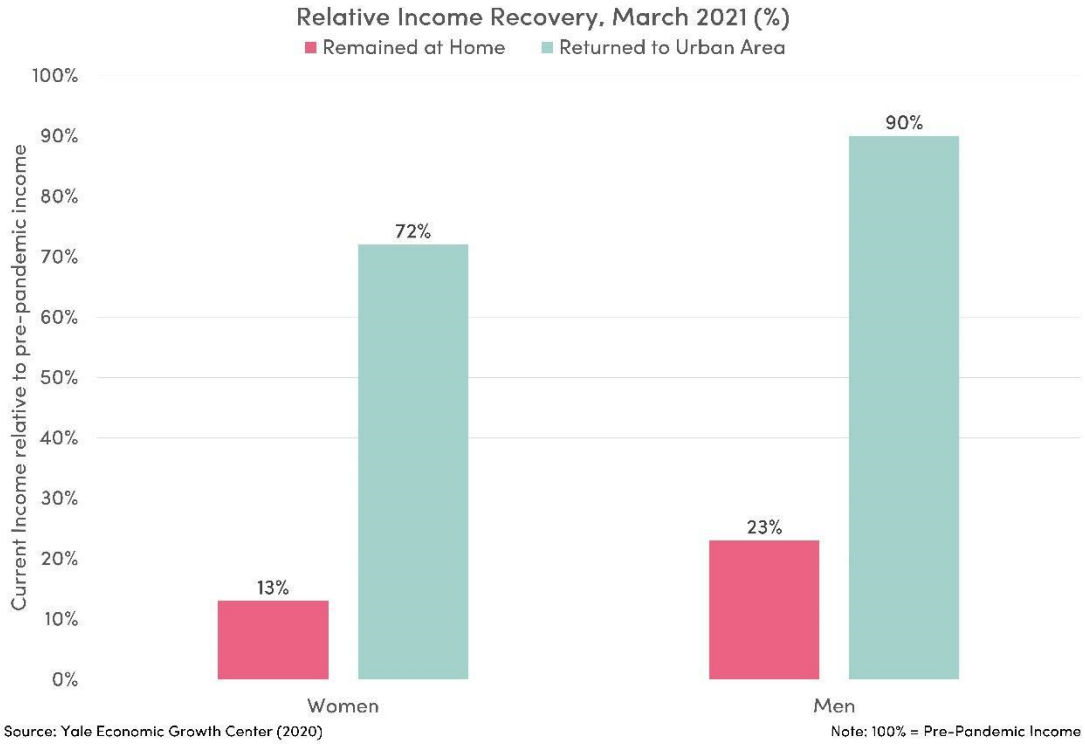


Figure 12

The majority of studies that examine the impact of the pandemic on migrants' incomes reach similar conclusions, with one study showing that as much as 82% of the households surveyed noted a drop in their income (Shukla et al., 2021). The varying degrees of the decline in income are also apparent along the urban-rural divide (Figure 11). Research conducted by the Yale Economic Growth Center (2020) concluded:

> Those who remained at home in rural areas were more likely to report being unemployed, reducing food consumption, mortgaging or selling assets, spending down savings, and taking loans to make ends meet.

Although informal and migrant workers experienced an almost universal decrease in income, there were also significant transitions to low-paying jobs or total unemployment in the labor market (Figure 12). Following the trends of gender disparities explained in Section II, it would be reasonable to conclude that casually-employed women migrant workers experienced the most significant reduction in income levels (UNDP, 2021).

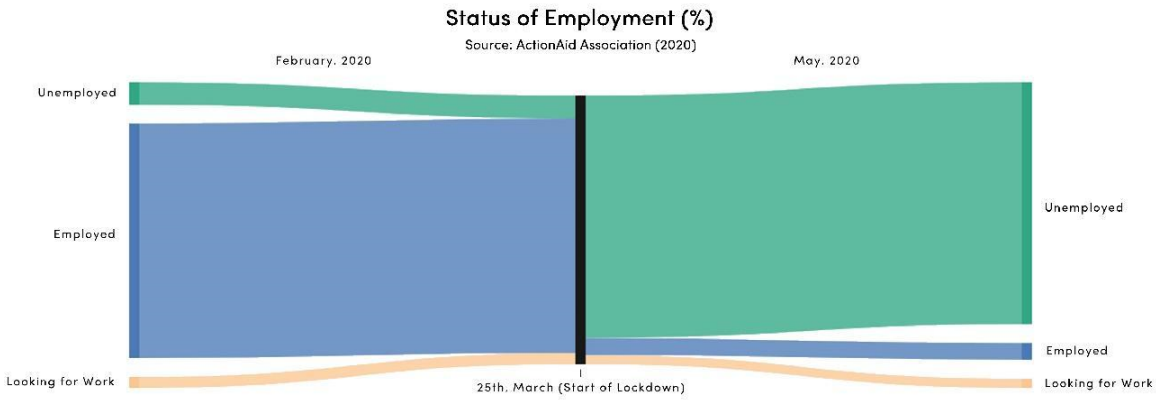


Figure 13

According to the research published by the United Nations Development Programme, pre-lockdown incomes were around ₹14,822 for households and ₹6,937 for individuals. These income levels saw a significant drop during the harshest months of the lockdown with household incomes at just ₹8,379 and individual incomes at ₹3,276. As the economy started improving and restrictions began easing, household incomes reached ₹11,975 and individual incomes reached ₹5,279. However, these recovered income levels in the month of November, 2020 were still 19% lower than their initial levels back in February, 2020. Furthermore. around 26% of the households surveyed went into debt during the same time period due to the loss of their primary source of income combined with the initial lack of support from the government (UNDP, 2021; Figure 13)).

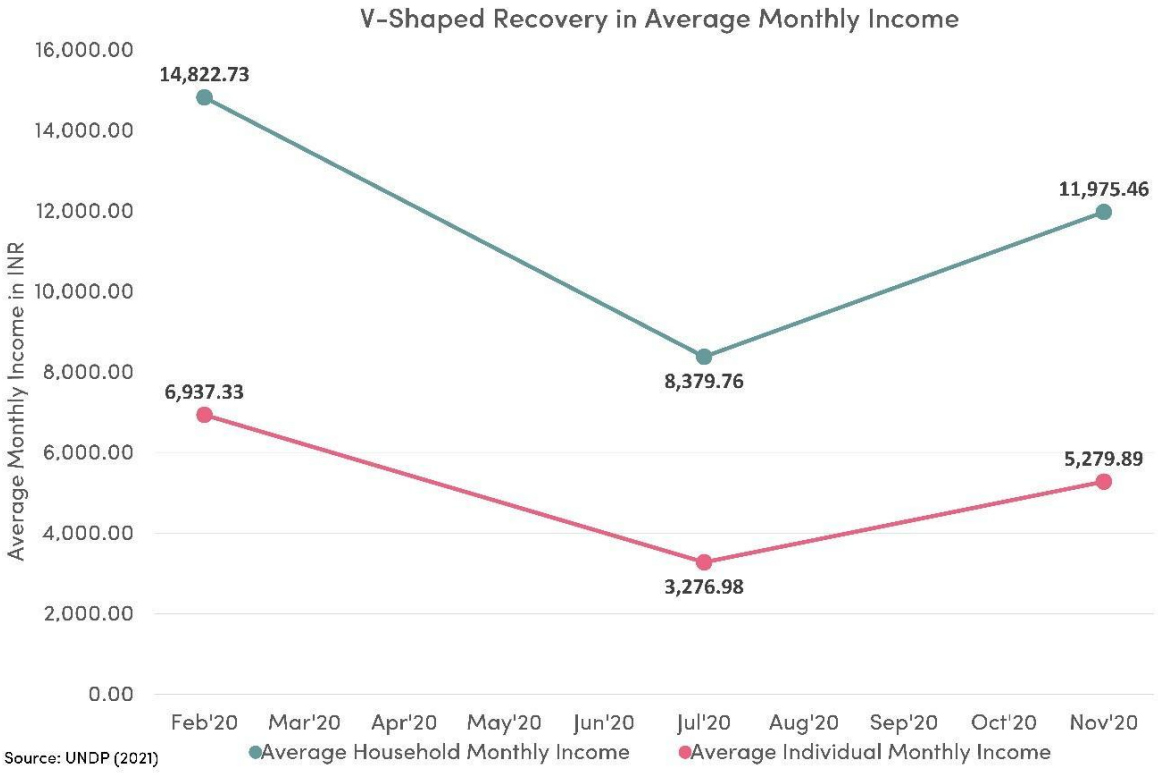


Figure 14

In the case of such vulnerable groups, the loss of livelihoods and rising debt obligations drives a significant cascading effect of negative consequences on their ability to afford basic necessities such as rent and food. Such unfortunate circumstances were further worsened due to the inherent problems of the unorganized sector. As informal employment opportunities fall outside the ambit of labor laws, there exists no recourse or avenue for such migrant workers to

avail employment benefits and social security schemes. While it is imperative that we continue to ramp up containment efforts, and investments in public healthcare systems, it cannot be at the cost of the livelihoods of crores of migrant workers. It has been estimated that at least 12 crore people have been adversely affected by the livelihood crisis shortly after the imposition of lockdowns and restrictions (Yadav, 2020).

*Food Security*

As lockdowns and restrictions continued to ravage the Indian economy resulting in significant hardship for migrant workers and their sources of income, they had no choice but to reduce their levels of food consumption. Nutrition security among rural migrant workers suffered due to these significant shifts in food consumption. A significant majority of migrant workers reported that they were increasingly unable to afford costlier food products like meat and produce, instead choosing to buy grains and staples in bulk (Swinnen, 2020). However, in terms of the larger trends we see across the entire demographic, migrants that could at least afford some kind of food would be considered the fortunate ones, with a study conducted by ActionAid Association (2020) stating:

> During the lockdown period, 59% of the workers reported that they were unable to meet their daily family expenses since they have lost their sources of livelihood. Due to the lack of income, more than 50% of workers reported that they reduced their food consumption to once in a day. There is also a massive decline in the availability of water in the source state. Around 71% of respondents said that they used to have access to sufficient water before the lockdown, but only 38% reported so during the lockdown.

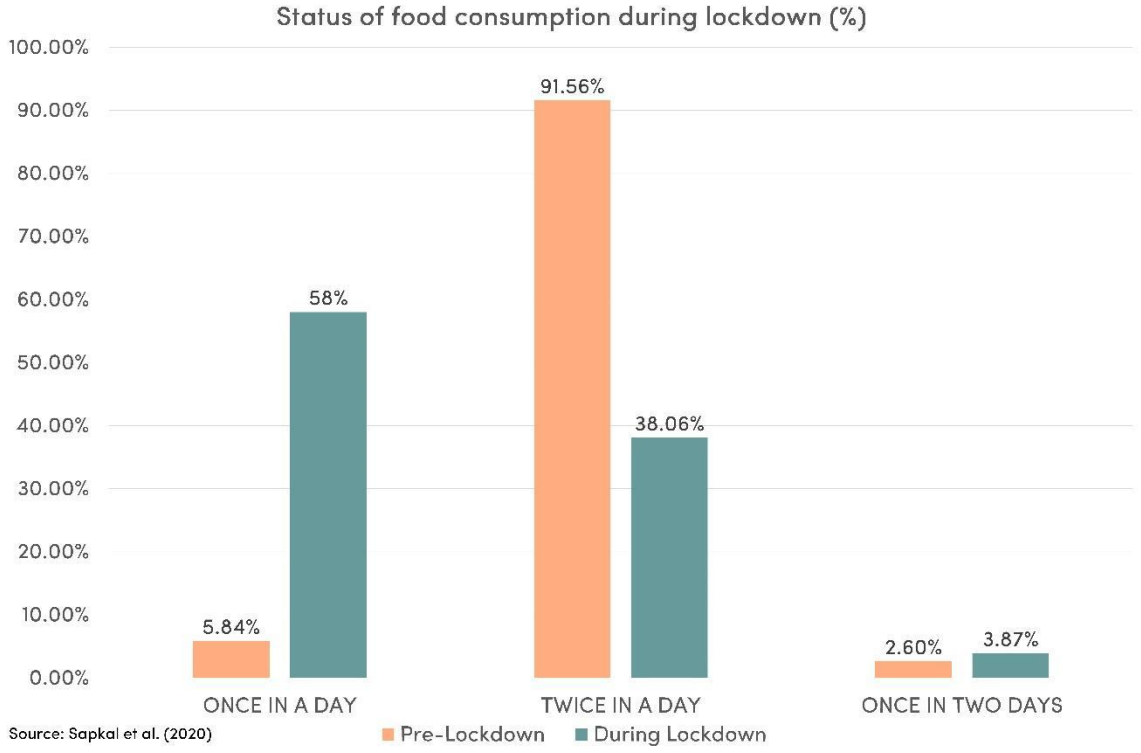


Figure 15

Only 38.06% of the respondents ate twice a day in comparison to 91.56% just a few months prior while 58% ate once in a day, a significant increase compared to the 5.48% before the announcement of the lockdowns (ActionAid Association, 2020; Figure 14). The results of our survey concur with these findings with 82% of respondents stating that they lack the resources to plan and prepare for another series of lockdowns (Figure 10).

Surveys conducted by the Stranded Workers Action Network (2020) found:

> The percentage of people who have not received rations from the government has decreased from around 99 percent on 8th April to about 96 percent on 13th April. In other words, 2 weeks into the lockdown, only 1 percent of the stranded workers had received rations from the government and 3 weeks into the lockdown, only 4 percent of them had received rations from the government."

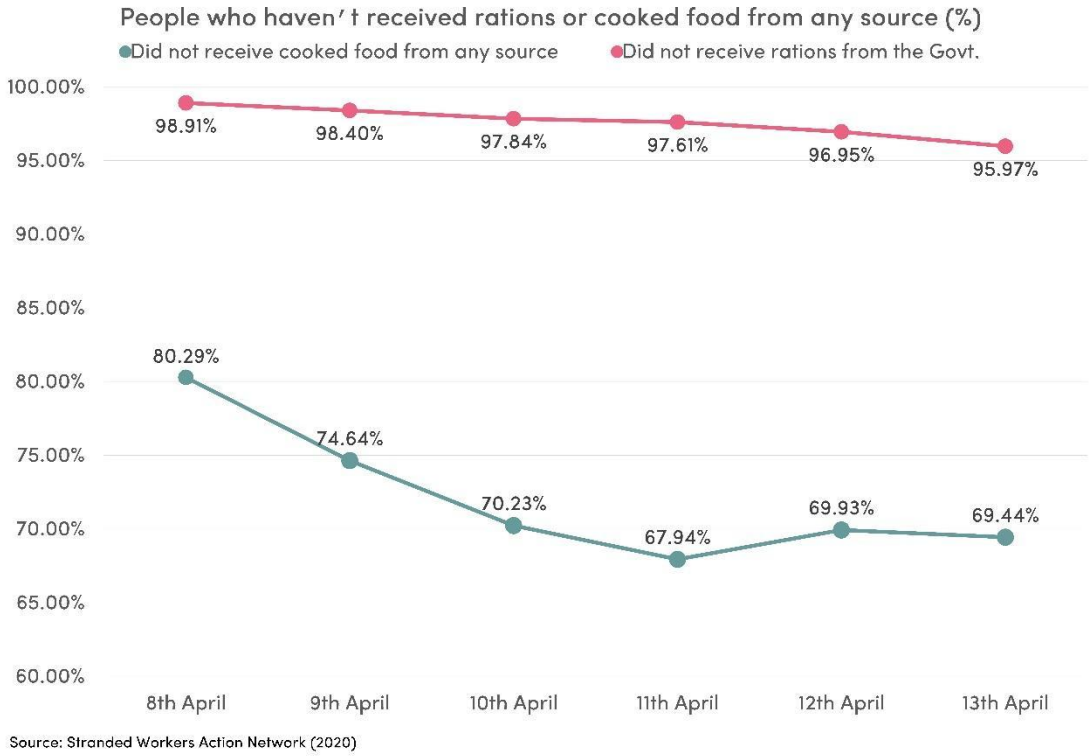


Figure 16

These inferences are further exemplified by the fact that although 62% of the respondents in our primary surveys were easily able to find information about government relief policies, only 10% of them were actually able to avail these schemes and programmes to their benefit (Figures 16 and 17). According to studies like Sapkal et al. (2020); these conclusions are similar across the entire nation, with the most significant factor being that migrants didn't have their documents and bank accounts linked to their Aadhar cards (Figure 18).

**Figure 17**

| Were you able to easily find information about government relief policies? | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| No | 19 | 38.000 | 38.000 | 38.000 |
| Yes | 31 | 62.000 | 62.000 | 100.000 |
| Missing | 0 | 0.000 | | |
| Total | 50 | 100.000 | | |

Source: Primary Data Surveys

**Figure 18**

| Were you able to avail government relief policies for migrants during Covid? | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| No | 45 | 90.000 | 90.000 | 90.000 |
| Yes | 5 | 10.000 | 10.000 | 100.000 |
| Missing | 0 | 0.000 | | |
| Total | 50 | 100.000 | | |

Source: Primary Data Surveys

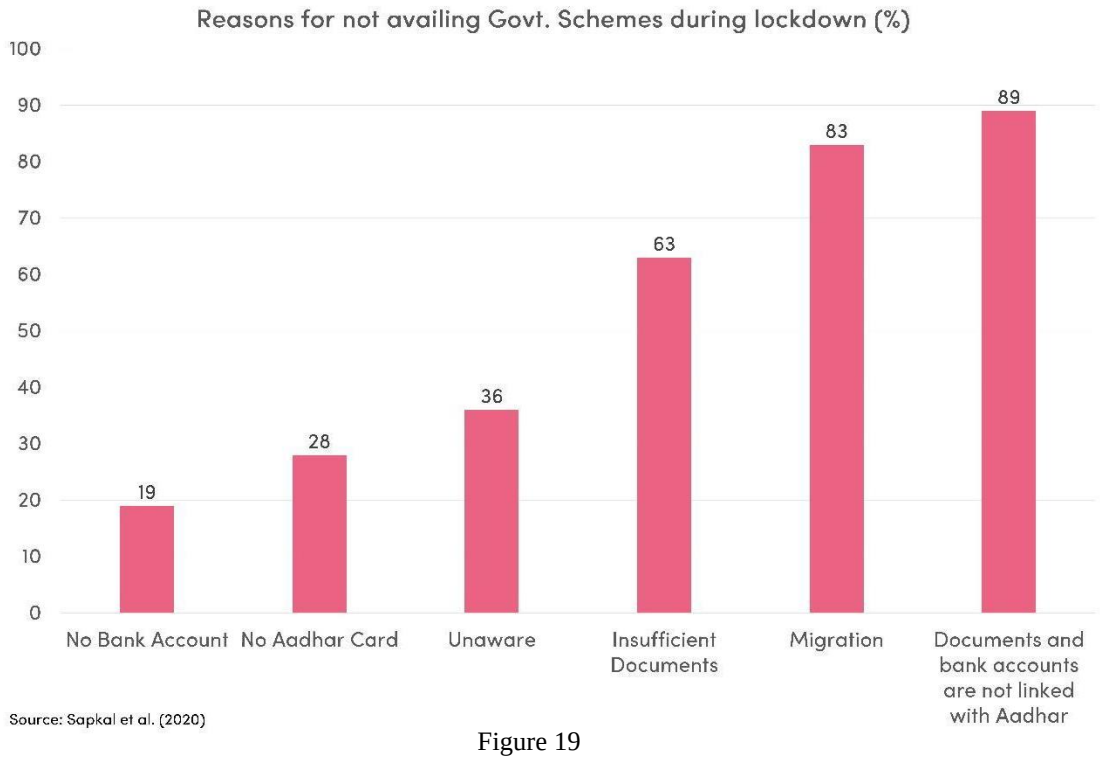


Figure 19

This regrettable situation of food insecurity was created in part because of the unfortunate timing of the announcements of lockdowns and restrictions. The peak harvest period of staple crops like wheat and barley coincided with these announcements, resulting in a large amount of these valuable resources being wasted (Pothan et al., 2020). Since migrants are predominantly seasonal workers, they rely on these short periods of harvest season to earn the majority of their entire income and due to the ongoing restrictions, it unintentionally ended up negating all of their hard work and effort. The scenario worsened even further when strict restrictions on transportation systems were imposed, essentially halting the supply chain of invaluable food stuffs across the entire country. The mass exodus of migrants unable to survive in unknown areas left the agricultural sector reeling with massive labor shortages. Upon further analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on the local food systems in India, Pothan et al. (2020) reported that:

> The bumper harvest of wheat in the northern part of India hobbled due to shortage of labour and transportation bottlenecks. There was a huge post-harvest loss of vegetables and fish stock as a result of zero business. Hindrance of transportation and fear of vigilant checks at state borders made it even difficult for the sales to happen. The poultry and meat industry was under immense loss due to the fake rumours of the association of COVID-19 and animals.

**Discussion**

Section I: An Analysis of the Indian Government's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic with a special emphasis on the Migrant Crisis.

Ghosh (2020) concluded that “The Indian experience of COVID-19 has been disastrous even before the disease has reached a peak, and this is largely due to the central government response, which has been wanting in several crucial respects.” In specific, we are going to explore two uniquely core features of the Indian Government’s response to the pandemic which had a significant and yet disproportionate impact on the migrant population. They are: (a) inadequate planning and co-ordination, and (b) caste, class and gender bias in policy response.

*Inadequate Planning and Co-ordination*

Owing to the fact that the Indian workforce has an unusually high concentration in the informal sector, the vast majority of these workers do not possess written contracts, legal protections and social welfare benefits (Roy et al., 2020). Furthermore, a significant majority of migrant workers also live hand-to-mouth where their entire livelihoods and financial capacities depend on short windows of employment opportunities. As a result of these factors, the migrant population became one of the most severely affected demographic groups in India, as the government instituted nationwide lockdowns and restrictions severely limiting employment and travel opportunities. The defining aspect in this scenario is the failure of the government to prepare for the consequences of such sweeping policies, resulting in the loss of livelihoods and the inability of migrant workers to afford basic necessities, significantly disrupting their living conditions.

As a co-operative federalist state, India has an organized and efficient power hierarchy within its central and state governments with the national government taking the lead in national matters and policy responses. However, this was not the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, with alarmingly little coordination between the two levels of government. As nationwide restrictions and lockdowns were announced, the vast majority of state governments were left scrambling to deal with the aftermath of such hasty and sweeping policies. Despite little to no prior consultation or suggestion from the representatives of these states, the central government would continue to issue such hasty responses and policy recommendations (Thacker, 2020). This lack of coordination combined with the state's inability to execute contingency plans led to an overall sense of confusion and chaos among the migrant population. As migrant workers found themselves stranded in foreign cities and towns, making treacherous journeys home with little to no support, we witnessed an appalling situation of complete chaos, long delays, and overcrowded bus and train stations that made headlines in 2020.

*Caste, Class and Gender bias in Policy Response*

The Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic were based on the existing divisions of caste, class and gender and only served as to further exemplify them (Ghosh, 2020). The downtrodden populations of India would find it practically impossible to enforce lockdown restrictions without additional support owing to their difficult living conditions even before the pandemic. The delay in expanding welfare schemes while simultaneously announcing sweeping and disruptive policies like nationwide restrictions and lockdowns served to negatively affect the migrant population along the divisions of their socioeconomic classes. As we explored in Section II of Data Interpretation and Analysis, these disproportionate effects of the pandemic also existed along gender disparities, with women experiencing a greater percentage of job loss and a sharp increase in domestic violence, all the while being disproportionately vulnerable due to the lack of government protection.

In the initial months of the lockdown, the government provided no assistance to the migrant workers stuck in foreign cities, ultimately forcing them to return home by themselves without any assistance. As the pandemic worsened, trains and buses were being used as transportation services, but even then, the full fare was charged making the provisions virtually inaccessible for the vast majority of migrant workers (The Hindu, 2020). The lack of government interventions contributed to the worsening living conditions of migrant workers, rendering a picture of an appalling situation with the migrant and downtrodden populations of India bearing the greatest burden of the pandemic.

Section II: Policy Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting migration crisis in India require comprehensive and immediate policies on the part of both state and central governments. Through data analysis, we have uncovered that the pandemic has caused significant distress to migration workers, both

social and economic. Therefore, owing to the fact that this crisis involves numerous intersecting factors and causes, solutions to this issue are extremely complex.

As part of this section, we will explore: (a) short term solutions, and (b) long term solutions to assist the migrant population.

*Short-term Solutions*

The most significant factor to consider is that internal migrant struggles can only be abated through the Indian government's handling of the spread of the coronavirus, namely the obtainment and distribution of vaccines. Government efforts in distributing the vaccine thus far have largely been ineffective, primarily due to the complexity of ensuring a population of 1.3 billion citizens are fully vaccinated in a rapid amount of time (BBC, 2021). Supply constraints and quality manufacturing issues have emerged as the nation has rushed to distribute the vaccine swiftly - a concern that can only be addressed either through the government's investment into purchasing more vaccines from companies and other nations or by rapidly increasing their own manufacturing capacities. Vaccine allocation has been a struggle for another reason: numerous people have developed inaccurate fears of the side effects of the vaccines leading to an increasing number of individuals refusing to acquire it. Lack of government transparency in displaying information about the situation has led to these trepidations to be amplified. An approach that the Indian government could take to diminish these fears is to prevalently portray information about the benefits of the vaccine to push more and more individuals to receive it.

Providing wage support could potentially aid these migrant workers, as has been proven through implementation of such schemes globally. Even in a scenario in which India announces a minimum guarantee of Rs 5000 per month in Jan Dhan accounts, most migrant workers affected by the pandemic could avoid migration altogether, for they would have some money to pay for basic provisions until the economy reopened (Julka, 2020). Enacting workers with recurring monetary supply until they obtain a reasonable employment, would automatically improve the mental and physical health of migrant workers as an indirect by-product as the majority of health concerns have already been attributed to unemployment.

PDS rations are another area in which support can be greatly enhanced. Doubling of these for a period of 2-3 months would mitigate struggles faced by migrant workers in regards to acquisition of basic needs. In addition, these should be provided free in advance through home delivery, along with basic foods (including cooking oil, pulses, food grains, etc.) and sanitation products (most importantly soap and sanitary pads). It is essential that access to these basic needs becomes universalized, especially so that even those without ration cards can obtain them. Many impecunious individuals and migrants in cities frequently do not have cards; they must also be assisted as per the directions of the Supreme Court issued in 2016 (judgment related to drought affected areas dated May 16, 2016 in Writ Petition (C) No. 857 of 2015, Swaraj Abhiyan – (II) versus Union of India & Ors.).

Additionally, as mentioned previously, the majority of men who migrate in search of better employment opportunities leave their spouses and children behind in their native areas. As a result of this situation's prevalence, women have started to lead an increasingly greater number of households in the last few decades. However, this also adds a great deal of responsibility to the women both inside and outside of their homes, forcing them to often take on additional jobs to maintain financial stability. Subsequently, these women are often not eligible for governmental assistance and welfare programs (Rai, 2020). To mitigate this lack of access, the identification of individuals not covered by cards should be the work of officials, and should be aided by local organizations, trade unions, local representatives and more; action regarding this should be taken as soon as possible to ensure ubiquitous ration and welfare scheme access to help maintain financial stability.

Furthermore, press releases from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare at the beginning of this pandemic highlighted the urgent need for improved mental healthcare access for the migrant population. In this increasingly volatile environment, addressing the mental health crisis that has emerged as a result of this increase in unemployment can be done both by enforcing policies focused on government provisions of mental health resources such as free counselling, as well as by examining underlying methods of increasing employability and financial security for these workers.

*Long-term Solutions*

The government of India has, in the past and present, tried to find practical and pragmatic solutions to address and hopefully attenuate to an extent the economic insecurity, unemployment, and several other distresses that migrant workers face. The allocation and applicability of such schemes to India however can often prove to be extremely complicated and complex in nature, especially as identification, ration cards, Aadhar cards, and many more documents are mandatory and are required to be validated to be enrolled under a government scheme.

One of the most prominent and straightforward solutions proposed has been the building of a better framework allowing for safe migration. The conception of solutions that ensure workers' protected well-being going forward, and that better the existing systems of migration could greatly increase the ability of migrants to be ensured safety and security (in all facets) in the case that they must migrate again. Part of this may include the encouragement of more countries to adopt treaties protecting migrant workers, such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. While almost 68 countries globally have joined, many prominent migrant worker recipient countries in Southeast Asia and the Middle East are missing, countries like India and Nepal (Coca, 2020).

One of the most prominent complications is the universal inapplicability of social welfare schemes such as subsidized grain and state requirements for government jobs. It is also theorized that noticeably low migration rates among male migrants in India may be due in part to the lack of a formal insurance system that would help them evaluate the risks associated with migration combined with relatively well-functioning rural informal insurance mechanisms. Establishing such a formal insurance system along with expansion of social welfare schemes could greatly improve this situation (Rajan & Bhagat, 2021). The majority of migrant workers hail from rural regions, regions where employment in agriculture is the most sought out form of work. Agriculture is dependent on seasonal factors, rendering it a difficult stream of employment for workers seeking long-term employment. This indicates that the government must identify and provide other forms of jobs that deviate from the restrictions of agriculture allowing for a more stable occupation to curb unemployment numbers (Rajan & Bhagat, 2021). Providing education to develop the skills of these migrant workers may improve their work conditions and job search. The government's push for urbanization appears to be the most plausible means to produce more jobs for these workers (which would be boosted by workers' upskilling) while also benefiting India's gross domestic product – which is predicted to increase from 47 percent in 1980–81 to 75 percent in 2030 if this increase in urbanization is maintained (Gupta P., 2019).

## Conclusion

As the pandemic rages on, it is imperative to understand that the migrant crisis is neither recent nor unique to the COVID-19 pandemic, rather, it serves as a catalyst for highlighting the faults within the existing institutions and policies in the Indian social and economic structures. And hence, solutions to a social phenomenon of such magnitude and complexity cannot exist in a vacuum, and requires a plethora of changes targeting multiple facets of the problem.

In this regard, our study examined the changes in migrant worker living conditions that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent restrictions in order to identify the factors that led to the largest migrant crisis in Indian history. Our research began with arguably the biggest obstacle to analyzing social phenomena - there was no government-run database on migrant workers; instead, we had to work in conjunction with civil societies and NGOs to gain further insights into what the pandemic experience was like from the migrant workers themselves. Having analyzed the evidence, it is clear that not only do antiquated gender norms, stigma surrounding mental illnesses, caste and socioeconomic barriers significantly impact the quality of life led by migrant workers, but that they are only made worse by the government of India's lack of adequate policies and timely actions. We recommended a combination of short- and long-term solutions aimed at providing immediate relief and support to the affected migrant workers, as well as building preventive measures for future contingencies.

Over the past decade, the Government of India has failed to safeguard the rights and interests of migrant workers, and the COVID-19 pandemic only serves to reinforce the urgent need for this policy stance to change. Instead of haphazard policies attempting to deal with the aftermath of such crises, it is essential to build comprehensive frameworks and preventive measures to avoid such an outcome in the first place. A paradigm-shift in the Government of India’s approach to the informal sector and migrant workers would be beneficial for such vulnerable demographics as humane, inclusive and long-term solutions are the need of the hour.

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