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## **The COVID-19 pandemic and poor women's agency**

A case of domestic workers in Delhi

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**Abstract:** Studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated that poor women have been the worst sufferers in terms of pay cuts and job losses. Women are the hardest hit also at the household level. They have to bear the brunt of constrained household budgets and have also encountered increasing levels of domestic violence during the long and uncertain spells of pandemic-induced lockdowns and restrictions when men stayed home for much longer periods of time than usual. This paper on the gender impact of the pandemic and the consequent lockdowns and curfews in the city of Delhi, India, seeks to explore whether women who have achieved some agency from their work gain a stronger capacity for intra-household bargaining and are less likely to face household-level discrimination. We also try to understand whether the extent, severity, and nature of discrimination within the household may change if women have better chances, than men, to retain or get back their jobs. Analytically, we draw on Amartya Sen's (1987) discussion on cooperative conflicts and on discussions of agency. Empirically, we rely on 31 interviews with women domestic workers, conducted in-person in Delhi.

**Key words:** agency, cooperative conflicts, domestic workers, gender, India, intra-household bargaining

**JEL classification:** B5, I3, J46, J71

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## 1 Introduction

Studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated that the poor in general and poor women in particular are the worst sufferers in terms of pay cuts and job losses caused by the economic fallout of the pandemic (Alon et al. 2020; Deshpande 2020a, 2020b). Women are the hardest hit also at the household level and have had to bear the brunt of the reduction in household budget. Studies also point out the increasing levels of domestic violence against women during the long and uncertain spells of pandemic-induced lockdowns when men stayed at home for much longer periods of time than usual (Agarwal 2021a, 2021b). This study on the gender impact of the pandemic and the consequent lockdowns and curfews in the city of Delhi, India, seeks to explore whether women who have gained some agency from their work are less likely to face household level discrimination. We also try to understand whether the extent, severity, and nature of discrimination within the household may change if women have better chances, than men, to retain or get back their jobs.

We use two overarching concepts to inform the analysis of our data. A key concern in this paper is to understand the implications of the economic fallout of the pandemic on intra-household dynamics. The impact of any calamity is usually analysed holding the household as a unit. The implicit assumption here is that families are essentially ‘harmonious’ units maximizing a ‘single/joint utility function’ (see Becker 1981: 33). Closer and detailed empirical observations contradict the concept of harmony: the division of resources within a household often turns out to be discriminatory against women in general and girl children in particular in poor South Asian economies. This is likely to be even more acute at times of hardships induced by calamities of different kinds, such as a pandemic. Therefore, we draw on Amartya Sen’s (1987) seminal work on cooperative conflicts within households, conceptualizing family as a bargaining unit in which family members co-operate as long as it is beneficial to each of them. Importantly, Sen (1987) also highlights that personal perceptions are crucial for determining the manner in which family members negotiate intra-household relationships. Situations of conflict among family members also arise. The final outcome naturally depends on the differential bargaining powers of the household members. Agarwal (2008: 162) argues that ‘family breakup and female victimization can thus be seen as outcomes of shifts in relative male–female entitlements and fall-back positions, and so in their relative bargaining strengths within the family’. In the backdrop of overall precarity in households, and the informal nature of domestic work, we discuss the implications of this work for the fall-back positions of our respondent workers. We are also interested in how respondents perceive their interests, work, and contribution to their household. The nature of domestic work may be seen as ‘reflective of’, ‘traditional within household divisions’ (Sen 1987: 14); however, we posit the question of whether this understanding of domestic work is challenged by women workers themselves, implicitly or explicitly. Is it the case then that women domestic workers view their paid work as important, as clearly separate from their personal domestic work, and as being significant for running their households? Intra-household dynamics and bargaining are also significantly affected by a range of ‘extra-household environmental parameters’ (Agarwal 1997; McElroy 1990), including for instance community initiatives and social protection interventions by government agencies. In the present paper, we are also interested in the implications of extra-household factors on intra-household dynamics reported by our respondents.

To explore cooperative conflicts within the household, we are interested in how women workers exercise agency. Sen (1987, 1990) suggests that an individual’s ‘agency role’ may be understood as being ‘overshadowed by social rules’ while *also* contributing to a person’s ‘well-being’, albeit in a backdrop that might demonstrate a ‘spectacular lack of equity’ (see Sen 1987: 45). Keeping in mind the social inequity of intra-household dynamics, we draw on Sen’s view that to understand intra-

household relationships, reflecting on agency and perceptions is important for understanding women's well-being. We also draw on Naila Kabeer's (1999) framing of agency and empowerment, as we have an interest in reflecting on *how* those who might not have previously made strategic personal decisions acquire such an ability. Thus, we are interested in a processual understanding of how agency is negotiated. This includes how one's exercising of agency comes about, and indeed how the capacity to exercise agency, once gained, may also falter or otherwise be modified, with consequent implications for intra-household bargaining. We are therefore interested in the circumstances and context that affect a person's agency. Specifically, we consider whether domestic work itself, despite its precarity, proves to be a source of somewhat 'stable' employment for these women workers, particularly in the context of the pandemic. We consider how our respondent women workers view the significance of their work for helping them to cope with the pandemic.

We focus on domestic workers because of the significance of this category of work for women workers in urban areas. The latest quinquennial survey of the National Sample Survey (2011–12) shows that domestic service has emerged as one of the most important occupations for women in urban areas.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, Delhi stands at the second position in the country when we consider the number of households with domestic work as the main source of income. Primary surveys suggest that most of the domestic workers of Delhi are migrants. The settled city-dwelling domestic workers often migrate with their husbands. Researchers, however, have also mentioned cases of single adult women's migration for domestic service sometimes through recruiting agencies and sometimes through personal contacts in the city (Jain 2016). Girl children migrate singly as well, through agencies and family networks, as full-time workers in middle-class city homes (Chakravarty and Chakravarty 2015). In cases of the last two categories, women usually do not settle down in the city unless their families join them at some point. Research based on primary data has also documented that in a substantial number of cases urban domestic workers have turned out to be the main breadwinners for their families (Chakravarty and Chakravarty 2015; Neetha 2004, 2013).

In this paper, we draw on interviews with 31 part-time female domestic workers, who have been working in Delhi for varying periods of time. Interviews were conducted in-person, keeping in mind COVID-19 protocols such as wearing protective face masks and physical distancing. However, the fieldwork was delayed and postponed several times when fears of infection were particularly acute in Delhi. Some follow-up clarifications were sought by telephone, although for these too, we did our best to carry out face-to-face meetings.

The primary survey was conducted in different parts of Delhi in two phases: during February–March 2021 and then again in July–August 2021. Because of its informal nature, there is no ready list of domestic workers available on the basis of which one can think of drawing a proper sample of any kind. In any case, the aim of this study, and hence, the methodology adopted, consists of exploring the possibilities of different gender outcomes of the pandemic when women have already achieved some agency rather than the production of statistically generalizable findings. We thus decided to stick to a carefully chosen small sample of women with whom we could have detailed discussions. We decided to concentrate only on settled, city-dwelling adult domestic

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that home-based manufacturing taken as a whole engages more women urban informal workers than domestic work alone (19 per cent of total female urban informal employment is in home-based manufacturing taken as a whole, compared with 11.7 per cent of the same in domestic work) (see Chen and Raveendran 2014). However, home-based employment can be disaggregated into several distinct types of work, for instance, garment work, kite making, bidi rolling, zari and embroidery, basket and rope making, and making food products, which are all quite distinct. Domestic work on the other hand mainly refers to work done by carers for children and older adults, cooks, and maids.

workers who have been based in Delhi for some time with their families. All of our respondents work on a part-time basis in one or more households, doing primarily cleaning, cooking, and in some cases adult or child care work beyond these tasks.

The locations of the slums we visited were solely determined by our ability to establish a contact through whom we could approach others. We visited four slums in the city, two were in southwest Delhi and other two in north Delhi. Many workers had simply refused to talk to us; those who agreed to talk, often did not have the patience or the time to answer the minute details we needed to understand the household dynamics in the context of the pandemic, and therefore we needed to make repeated visits. As most of these women's husbands were unemployed during the months when fieldwork was conducted, they were often found to be at home interfering in the interview process. Thus, we tried to speak with the women outside. This made the whole process even more challenging. We tried to speak with them either during their free hours in a nearby park or on the way to their workplaces and in some cases when they were at work. None of these were easy, especially given the pandemic situation in the city. We could collect detailed and insightful data only from a few women among the 31 respondents that could really capture the nuances of the household dynamics during the hard-hit days of the pandemic. We could not get data for the period during the second wave and its aftermath for many of the women with whom we interacted during the first phase, as several of them could not be contacted later, even by telephone. It is worth noting that the reduction in mobile phone connections in the period during and after the pandemic has been documented in the Indian context, and this is viewed as indicative of economic hardship. Owing to the above-mentioned factors, our findings are mostly indicative in nature.

This paper has five sections. In Section 2 we briefly touch upon the hardships faced by the poor due to the pandemic on the basis of existing literature. Section 3 discusses the significance of domestic service in creating a relatively stronger fall-back position and in turn agency in working women. With reference to our survey data, this section also discusses some broad manifestations of such agency at the workplace during the difficult months of the pandemic. In Section 4 we further elaborate on the question of emergence of agency through domestic work and its implications for intra-household negotiations during the pandemic, focusing on four detailed case studies. Section 5 concludes.

## **2 Hardships due to the pandemic**

In a global context, India witnessed one of the most stringent national lockdowns spread over the months of March–May 2020 (Vyas 2020). This was followed by continuing lockdown-like conditions for several more months in 2020, from June 2020 onwards (see Appendix Table A1). Later, state and local level lockdowns and curfews were imposed again during the exceptionally devastating second wave of the pandemic from April to July 2021. Curfews and various restrictions were also imposed from December 2021 to January 2022, as a public health measure to manage the pandemic. The lockdowns themselves were poorly planned and seemed to ignore the living conditions of the working poor, where there is typically little or nothing to fall back on by way of social protection and where regular access to a livelihood is crucial. While the stringency and the period of lockdowns and curfews varied between states to some extent, the overall effect of these measures for the economy was devastating. The lockdowns also had a significant human cost. A 'migrant crisis', primarily of informal sector workers walking from urban to rural areas, started immediately after the first lockdown was announced in March 2020 (see Stranded Workers Action Network 2020). On the basis of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's Consumer Pyramids Household Survey (CPHS) data, Vyas (2020) showed that unemployment rate in India during April–May 2020 was more than 23 per cent, which is three times higher than what had been

experienced in 2019. The brunt was mainly borne by workers who are informally employed without any employment security (also see Chen et al. 2021). The crisis continued well after the national lockdown was eased in early June 2020 because of the drastic decline in the purchasing power of a large section of people, with continued restrictions in some areas (Drèze and Somanchi 2021).

Drèze and Somanchi (2021) highlight that different public services that help sustain the poor got disrupted badly as a result of the lockdowns. These include nutrition-related services such as midday meals. They argue that the relief measures that were extended by the government could only partially handle hunger-related deprivation. The situation got even worse during the second wave of the pandemic beginning in late March 2021 and the consequent near complete lockdown in several parts of the country. Official statistics and macroeconomic aggregates do not shed much light on the livelihood crisis caused by the pandemic, although the adverse implications of the pandemic on specific categories of workers, including domestic workers in the Indian context, has been documented (for instance, see Banerjee 2021; Bhan et al. 2021). It is worth noting that in Delhi while specific categories of workers, such as transport workers and construction workers, were provided some cash transfers by the government for COVID-19 relief, no such payments were made available for domestic workers.

On the basis of several household surveys conducted by independent research institutions and civil society organizations as well as CPHS data, Drèze and Somanchi (2021: 9) conclude that ‘there is overwhelming evidence that the national lockdown of April–May 2020 was associated with a tremendous food crisis. Large numbers of people struggled to feed their families, and food intake dipped in both qualitative and quantitative terms for a majority of the population’. The Hunger Watch Surveys conducted by the Right to Food campaign in October–November 2020 and in December 2021–January 2022 also document in detail the hunger experienced by vulnerable populations as a direct consequence of the pandemic (see Raghunathan et al. 2022; Sinha 2022). In 2020, when the pandemic first struck, there was some recovery in the economy from June 2020 onwards, when the lockdown was gradually relaxed, but hardship persisted well beyond that. The recurring crises of early 2021 and late 2021 added to the distress already suffered. Drèze and Somanchi (2021: 9) also point out that relief measures helped, but they were patchy and their effective reach was uncertain. On the basis of carefully collected and scrutinized data mainly from media reports, Aman et al. (2021) conclude that there is a gross denial by the Indian state that a large number of people died as a result of lockdown-induced distress and losses in income leading to acute hunger.

In the next two sections we document and analyse our interactions with some women domestic workers who often had to negotiate with these hardships of the pandemic over the past few years, which have influenced their intra-household dynamics in different ways.

### **3 Women domestic workers, their source of agency, and the pandemic**

In our study we have concentrated mainly on adult, settled city-dwelling domestic workers living with their families because we are trying to understand the consequences of the pandemic for poor women in the context of their households (see Appendix Table B1). As mentioned, we conducted detailed interviews with 31 women, using semi-structured questionnaires.<sup>2</sup> In most of the cases

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<sup>2</sup> All interviews for this study were conducted in Hindi or Bangla and have been translated here into English by the authors.

these women are migrants and live in rented one-room accommodation. Most of these families used to be land-less labourers, share-croppers, or marginal farmers before migration. Increasing family size and the lack of a viable agrarian or non-agrarian income from rural areas causing a lack of work in the villages pushed them to the city. When they came to the city, they often had very limited or no assets and very little to fall back on in their native places.

The majority of the domestic workers we talked with were married before 18 years of age and had not worked for pay before marriage. But often they were party, together with their husbands, to the decision of moving to the city. They knew that both of them would have to work for a living. They also knew that domestic work would be the most viable avenue of employment for poor, migrant women in the city. Some of our respondents mentioned that even before migrating they had an idea about the nature of work and wages for different kinds of domestic services from the women who had migrated earlier from their villages. In fact, some of them took an important role in the decision-making process of migration to the city on the basis that domestic work would be readily available through their own networks. This finding is also supported by a larger primary survey conducted several years ago (Neetha, 2004). According to Neetha (2004: 1,684), 'domestic work for women is found to be the immediate resort for family survival, after migration. Availability of employment for women was found not only central to the family's decision to migrate but also gave women a considerable role in the decisions'. During our survey, we found a whole slum where the majority of residents are from the same village in northern West Bengal. Women from this squatter settlement work as domestic workers in the nearby apartment complexes. These women not only facilitate their family and friends to move to the city but also see to it that the women among them get enough jobs to survive through their own networks with employers.

Husbands of our respondents, on the contrary, often had some paid work experience mainly in the fields or in some petty trade and manufacturing before migration. In the case of most of our respondents, their husbands do not possess any particular skill that could have enabled them to get a somewhat better job in the city to improve their fall-back positions. We have found that in most cases husbands and wives both are hardly educated. The husbands of our respondents typically work as garbage pickers, vegetable or fruit vendors, shop attendants, watchmen, delivery staff, and security guards. Their earnings were sometimes less than what our respondent domestic worker women earned before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Only a few of the husbands were found to be working in relatively more skilled jobs such as drivers, plumbers, or electricians. Their incomes were in some cases substantial but often uncertain unless they worked under a contract with a household or an organization.

We found that even if the husbands earned substantially in most cases their personal expenditures were considerably high. A little over a third of our respondents reported that their husbands spend a significant amount of money on alcohol. Particularly these respondents reported domestic violence of varying degrees. Their husbands often failed to contribute to the household budget substantially and this led our respondent female domestic workers to emerge as breadwinners of their families. In other cases, sheer poverty led to our respondents seeking paid work. A majority of our respondents view the husband as the head of the family, but in reality they had developed distinct traces of agency through working and earning and they took most of their crucial decisions themselves.

Demand for domestic service particularly for part-time live-out domestic workers who we were interviewing was severely affected during the lockdown, as pointed out by all our respondents. This trend is also borne out in a WIEGO study of informal sector workers in 11 cities (see Chen et al. 2021). Given the nature of domestic service, almost all employers asked our respondents not to come for work once the lockdown was announced. Hardly any of the employers gave them full

salaries during the 2 months of the lockdown in 2020 irrespective of the employer's job status and earnings. A similar finding has been reported by Banerjee (2021) on the basis of a much larger sample. Things started getting normal very slowly after the first lockdown was partially lifted in June 2020. Employers did start calling back the domestic workers as this is an essential service, especially for middle-class working women and for households of persons in need of care. On the basis of large-scale macro data, research suggests a close relationship between the increased participation in paid employment of relatively affluent city women and increasing demand for domestic help (Chakravarty and Chakravarty 2008). By late 2020, most of our respondents had got back some work whereas most of their husbands were still looking for some stability in income.

However, several of our respondents reported that employers were now offering less money as they wanted them to work for fewer hours to do only the essentials. Such evidence is also prevalent in many large-scale surveys of domestic workers (e.g., Bhan et al. 2021). Some respondents also reported active effort by employer households to squeeze domestic workers by paying less money than earlier for a larger number of tasks that were often surreptitiously added to their work. But as pointed out earlier, middle-class households in an urban Indian context have become so dependent on domestic help that it seems to be impossible to do away with employing domestic workers altogether. This becomes obvious from our informal discussions with the resident welfare associations (RWAs) of large apartment complexes in Southwest Delhi.

Some respondent workers reported being harassed by RWAs, as they were repeatedly stopped at the gates of residential complexes by security guards employed by RWAs. However, it seems that RWAs started getting calls from some residents to allow their domestic workers to enter residential areas during the lockdown periods. These residents were extremely worried as they were completely dependent on different kinds of personal services performed by domestic workers. From our discussions, we also noticed an increase in the incidence of engaging full-time live-in workers who would stay with their employer's family. One of our respondents in fact was offered such work but refused to give up her part-time status since this would mean losing her personal freedom.

Other anecdotal evidence suggests that a notable number of middle-class employers living in different housing societies in Delhi accompanied their domestic workers to paid vaccination centres for inoculation.<sup>3</sup> In many cases where the housing societies conducted vaccination camps in their premises from the middle of June 2021, this included domestic workers often assisted by their employers. In the context of a discussion about who pays the charges for vaccination when the inoculation takes place in the camps organized by the RWAs, one respondent replied:

Why should I pay from my pocket? True, I need the jobs but it's also true that my employers need my services as well. One Didi<sup>4</sup> used to keep calling me often and she arranged for a gate pass for me. When other employers saw me coming to one house, they all started calling me and took the initiative to get the clearance from the RWA. I hardly earned anything for the last few months. I have no money to pay for the vaccine.

Let us remember that the burden of household work falls disproportionately on women across the classes (Deshpande and Kabear 2019). It has been pointed out that during the pandemic the

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<sup>3</sup> Reference is being made here to the period before July 2021 when free vaccinations at government centres were not commonly available. The Government of India had deployed a policy of limiting free vaccinations and encouraging paid vaccinations, the prices of which too were not regulated till June 2021 (see *The Hindu* 2021).

<sup>4</sup> This is a colloquial Bangla and Hindi term used in Delhi for a woman employer.

burden of household work on women increased significantly. Initially it was shared by men to some extent, but data show that this help from men tapered off with time (Deshpande 2020a, 2020b). In some cases our respondents mentioned that they did not go back to the households that employed them before the lockdown, despite being called back by them, because they were not paid anything at all during the lock down. Despite their vulnerability, these respondent workers were in a position to exercise agency and reject work in cases where they felt they had not been fairly treated during the lockdown period. They were confident of getting alternative jobs with some effort and time.

Another instance where domestic workers were seen as having a strong foothold in work can be seen in the following example related to care work for older persons. Rekha has been working as a carer in a household of an elderly couple. She has been looking after a man who is unable to walk. While she lost jobs in all other households during consecutive lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, in this household the employers simply could not manage without her services and she kept working through the lockdowns. Demand for care work for older adults, a relatively more skilled job within domestic work, is increasing in the cities with the increase in average life expectancy of the better-off classes. This demand is high especially in nuclear families where older adults live by themselves or where younger women from the household are engaged in paid work outside the home, where traditionally they have been expected to stay home and care for older persons in the family. We argue that these particular features of domestic work on the one hand and that this job is almost completely feminized (relatively few men are found in this segment of work) on the other have helped strengthen the fall-back position of paid women domestic workers significantly. This in turn has helped strengthen their agency role.

We argue therefore that the relative strengthening of women's fall-back position and emerging agency of women domestic workers in the household decision-making processes is the result of two factors. First, the husband does not have any fall-back position except his often-precarious informal job and substantial personal expenses. The precarity of informal jobs has been on the rise ever since demonetization in India in 2016 followed by the introduction of the goods and services tax (GST) in 2017 (Sinha 2022). Informal jobs such as street vending and daily-wage work especially got affected most severely. Let us remember that a large number of men (often the husbands of domestic workers) are engaged in these informal occupations disproportionately. Interestingly, these policies of demonetization and introduction of GST are unlikely to have had any effect on domestic service. A crucial second factor strengthening women's fall-back position is their engagement in domestic service, a livelihood option that has emerged as one of the most important occupations for poor women in the urban areas of India, especially in Delhi. Although this livelihood option suffers equally from the precarity of other informal work, it has specific features that have made it distinctively different, as discussed above. (We will discuss these features of paid domestic service in the next section again.) These women workers cannot be considered as passive agents in any way even though they may not be in a position to bargain at the workplace explicitly on a regular basis, as often they are not unionized as such. But when time is opportune they do exercise their agency and bargaining power at the workplace as well.

In the next section, we will document how this strengthening of fall-back position and achievement of agency by our respondents has influenced intrafamily outcomes due to pandemic-induced economic hardships, including significant loss of income in many instances. To present a nuanced understanding, we have divided our respondents' families into three categories on the basis of the family's status before the lockdowns began: Category 1: husband having a regular income, more than what the wife earns; Category 2: husband having a regular income but significantly less than that of the wife; and Category 3: husband having irregular earnings and who barely contributes to the household budget. The reason behind such a classification is to highlight the significance of women's involvement in paid domestic service in achieving an independent fall-back position and

also agency that turned out to be crucial in the context of the recent pandemic irrespective of their husband's status of earning before the pandemic. As 'agency' is a highly complex concept, we have not attempted to compare the strength of agency in different cases. Rather we have only tried to trace agency in its different forms through the life stories of four women workers. We present two case studies from Category 1, and one each from Category 2 and Category 3.<sup>5</sup> These case studies depict life stories to understand the importance of our respondents' acquired agency and perceptions of their work and intra-household relationships.

## 4 Intra-household bargaining, agency, and the pandemic: Life stories of four women

### 4.1 Category 1

#### *Ameena*

Ameena, a 24-year-old Muslim woman, belongs to the first category of households in our classification. She migrated 6 years ago with her husband from the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. Back in the village both she and her husband used to work in their family fields. The family has about 5 acres of land and the household was just able to manage two square meals a day. The couple decided to leave for Delhi as they had some relatives already in the city who assured help in settling down. Upon reaching both Ameena and her husband started searching for work. She could have joined rag picking or construction work. Earning in rag picking is uncertain. Moreover, rag picking is dominated by men; women work as helpers. Working in the construction sector does not ensure a fixed or regular income either. Also, when there is work, one has to work for the whole day. Ameena had two very young children at the time they migrated. Part-time domestic service, with its assured pay structure, thus turned out to be the best option. In 5 hours a day she could manage to earn more than half of what her husband did in 12 hours as a delivery staff in a large department store. Over the years, Ameena started working in more households and before the lockdown of 2020 she was earning about 11,000 rupees per month from four households whereas her husband was earning about 13,000 rupees.

As their children grew older, Ameena decided it would be best for the children to live with their maternal grandparents as she thought their education and well-being would be better taken care of in the village. Ameena had to send 4,000 rupees per month to her parents for looking after the children. Ameena's husband was not very keen with this arrangement as he felt the expenditure was too much. But Ameena argued and started working for longer hours in one household and picked up work in a new household to earn more money and convinced her husband. Back in her natal village, their son goes to a government school but their daughter goes to a madrassa (an educational institution run by a mosque). When asked why she has decided to put her daughter in a madrassa, Ameena said that she wanted her daughter to learn Urdu so that she can read and explain the Qur'an Shareef in the mosque to illiterate women in return for some remuneration. She said she has seen a woman earning in this manner in the locality where she lives in Delhi.

It was clear that even though Ameena was not the main breadwinner of the family she had assumed a crucial role in the decision-making process of the household. In this particular case, Ameena's ability to play an important role in the household decision-making process is not only because she earns a stable income—almost as much as her husband—but also because her natal family gives her significant support. Her unmarried brother, who works in Delhi, lives with them and

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<sup>5</sup> All names in case studies have been changed.

contributes substantially to household expenditure.<sup>6</sup> Ameena also mentions that her husband shouts at her often but never physically abuses her because of the presence of her brother and the brother's contribution to the family's budget.

In normal times, Ameena is able to save 4,000–5,000 rupees per month as the household expenditure is shared by the three of them and they do not have to pay house rent because there is a court case going on between the owner of the *jbuggi* (squatter settlement or slum) and the residents. She keeps this money in her brother's account and has managed to buy a small plot of land back in her natal village, which she jointly owns with her husband. Ameena's father looks after this land in their absence. Ameena feels that all this has been possible because of a more or less regular and stable income that she earns from domestic service.

During the lockdown of 2020 Ameena lost all her jobs. One household paid Ameena her full salary and another paid her half her salary and altogether she was earning around 3,000 rupees. Her husband was able to earn around 4,000 rupees only, that too for just 1 month. Ameena's brother continued to earn his full salary and assumed major responsibility of running the household. Ameena managed to send about 2,000 rupees to her children and could not save anything during this period. Because all of them were earning, they did not have to rely on cooked food supplied by individuals and organizations in their locality. After the lockdown Ameena was called back by three (of the four) households where she worked before. But two of these households offered a reduced salary. On top of this it took quite some time for her to get one more job as the fourth household did not call her back. At the time of the survey, Ameena managed to earn only 9,000 rupees from the four households. Her husband's salary also did not return to the pre-pandemic level as the department store was not getting enough customers and online purchases increased dramatically during the pandemic: he was now paid 8,000 rupees only.

The picture changed significantly during April 2021, with restrictions imposed for the devastating second wave of the pandemic. Ameena's husband was not called for work and did not have any income for more than 2 months. However, Ameena managed to earn 4,000 rupees from the two households where she was working. They had a very difficult time during the second wave and had to spend some of their savings, although her brother continued to support the household. Ameena was called back soon after the second-wave restrictions started being eased in early June 2021 and as employer households started negotiating with the RWAs as mentioned earlier, but her husband was not called back even in August 2021. In fact, he was thinking of going back to the village to work on their land and wanted Ameena to accompany him. But Ameena decided that as long as she had the jobs she would stay in Delhi, alone if necessary. She feels that the land they have is not enough for all four of them. Ameena's husband even threatened to give her *talaq* (divorce) if she did not move back with him. When asked what her reaction to this threat was, Ameena responded:

My husband cannot divorce me as the land we have is in joint title and my parents and brothers will make sure that he cannot do any mischief in this regard. I am sure the situation in Delhi will change soon, at least for domestic servants as my employers got in touch with me themselves after the second lockdown. This wasn't the case after the first lockdown (in 2020). I have already got four households to work again. My neighbours in my *jbuggi* are getting back their jobs as well. [. . .] In some cases the domestic workers are asked to stay with their employers as full-time employees. But we all have families and nobody (in my

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<sup>6</sup> Agarwal (1997) discusses the crucial role of natal family support in strengthening the fall-back position of women.

neighbourhood) agreed to this demand of the employers yet. If my husband goes away to the village, I will take up a 24-hour job and will earn much more than I do right now.

From Ameena's account two things become clear. First, she has already acquired confidence and a position of authority in her family through her engagement with a particular kind of job in urban areas, so much so that she simply did not care whether her husband took care of her. Yet, she cares for her husband and her family. The strength of her fall-back position mainly increases from the nature of her informal job in the city, the asset she jointly owns in her natal village, and from natal family support. Second, the strength of Ameena's husband's fall-back position decreases because of his loss of an informal but regular job and because he does not have single ownership of the land in the village. Family dissolution in such situations is unlikely because women, owing to strong cultural reasons, will try their best to keep the family intact unless circumstances are unbearable for them. Also, as the relative strength of men's fall-back position is declining with respect to women's fall-back position, men will not gain by abandoning their wives. It is interesting to note that both Ameena's perception about her own contribution towards the family and the importance of her paid work for the well-being of the family as well as to a certain extent for herself, especially in the context of the pandemic, become quite explicit here.

### *Kamlesh*

Kamlesh is a 40-year-old woman who lives with her husband and their 23-year-old son and 16-year-old daughter. Her second-born daughter married in 2020 and no longer lives with her natal family. Kamlesh started as a domestic worker only after the birth of her third child. This was also around the time when her husband had a disability-causing injury from an argument with relatives over a property dispute. Before this incident, her husband 'did not let her work' (for a wage). This was something Kamlesh was proud of. Her husband was then a contractually employed security guard at a factory. After the injury, he was ailing for a year and a half and was unable to work. With three children and a husband to care for, Kamlesh took up domestic work as a cleaner and cook, as the family now had no other income. Her husband subsequently returned to work, but a few years later he had an accident while walking their youngest daughter to school. One of the persons in the factory management, themselves close to retirement, helped Kamlesh's husband get a permanent job at the factory as a security guard. Although this meant a regular income for her husband, Kamlesh continued to work long hours because of the household's expenses, including significant medical expenses.

Kamlesh said there was a time when she worked at six or seven households. She took charge of her own household after her husband took ill, including decisions about her children's education and health care. Her son missed out on regular school for some time because she needed his help as carer for her husband, including for trips to hospitals. However, Kamlesh later ensured that her son finished school and got a school leaving certificate from a private school. She worked extra hours for the private education of her son. She was also keen to ensure that her daughters study. Her older daughter completed Class X (secondary school), but then was not interested in continuing to study. Kamlesh was disappointed but decided the best course of action would be for her daughter to marry. Her younger daughter completed Class X recently after the COVID-19 pandemic started, and Kamlesh is happy that this daughter seems interested in studying further. Kamlesh is in fact very keen that her younger daughter go to college. Apart from playing an important part in the household budget and in crucial decision-making processes, Kamlesh used to help her widowed mother financially on a regular basis till the pandemic struck.

During the lockdown in 2020, her two eldest children lived with their grandparents in their village in Uttar Pradesh. Only Kamlesh, her husband, and their youngest daughter stayed on in Delhi.

Most of her youngest daughter's time was spent on studying and sketching, which her daughter loves to do, and Kamlesh made sure that her daughter's academic work was not disturbed. While her husband still had to go to work, Kamlesh did not work from April to June 2020 but was paid in full by one of her employers. She worked in one household as cleaning staff and had two part-time jobs as a cleaner at a Delhi University office and as a cleaner of parking lots in a neighbouring residential colony. As a consequence of the lockdown, Kamlesh lost part-time work in the office. The work at the parking lot was lost later in 2020 because she took leave for her elder daughter's wedding. Her monthly income of 14,000 rupees in early 2020 dropped to 3,000 rupees (from part-time domestic work) by the end of 2020. Her husband's monthly income, however, remained approximately 16,000 rupees throughout the same period.

Kamlesh believes that, other than her children's education, an important matter on which she took charge recently was to ensure that the family moves houses. They were living with her husband's family and some family members consumed alcohol and drugs. Concerned that her son might get influenced by this, Kamlesh insisted that the family move residence even though the rent they had to pay was double what they were paying earlier. The family does not have a ration card, even though they have tried to get one made. Kamlesh also did not get ration in lieu of the midday meal scheme that her daughter, now a senior school student, was eligible for in primary school only. However, her husband's regular income helped them tide over the periods of lockdown. Till early 2020, Kamlesh participated in a local informal chit fund as a means of saving. In the early period after the lockdown, she and her husband sent some money to her in-laws and she also sent some to her mother. However, their savings had dried up by the end of 2020.

After the devastating second wave in early 2021, Kamlesh found work as a full-time domestic worker in a house that had servants' quarters. She moved in with her family and this allowed them to save money on rent. She also restarted sending money to her mother. Kamlesh's new job as a live-in domestic worker worked well for her for some time. But she noted that she was being given more and more work to do in the house, and so at the time of the follow-up interview, Kamlesh was looking for part-time work and a house to rent once again so she could move out of the accommodation at her employer's.

Kamlesh's story is significant because she has a cooperative relationship with her husband. The economic strain of the pandemic was dealt with by the family because of her husband's regular income during this period, while Kamlesh's own income was very significantly reduced. Her employment as a domestic worker has nonetheless been very significant for her and for strengthening her fall-back position, not least at a point in her life when she had to rely on her wages alone to cope with medical and other household expenses such as rent and her children's school fees. If we reflect on the *process* by which Kamlesh came to exercise the role of breadwinner at an earlier point in her life, it is worth noting that she herself is candid in pointing out that it was a severe personal crisis (her husband's injury) that led her to seek employment. It is also worth noting that Kamlesh exercised significant agency in the household decision-making process both before and during the pandemic. However, while her husband has a permanent income and therefore a stronger fall-back position, his serious health issues make him significantly dependent not only on Kamlesh but also on the children, especially their son. This particular fact might have influenced the household dynamics in general and during the pandemic in particular. During the long and repeated conversations, Kamlesh did not mention any form of violence inflicted on her.

## 4.2 Category 2

### *Deeksha*

Deeksha, a 29-year-old Hindu woman from a slum in southwest Delhi, worked mainly as a cook before the 2020 lockdown. A migrant from the Sundarbans, West Bengal, Deeksha was sent by her uncle to Delhi when she was only 9 years old, to work as a full-time domestic worker in the home of a Punjabi family. Her parents died when she was very young. She had no education and worked for this family for 10 years when her uncle got her married to a man from eastern Uttar Pradesh who was more than twice her age.<sup>7</sup> This was Deeksha's husband's second marriage. He had a son from his first marriage who was 9 years old when he married Deeksha. After the marriage they stayed in the village where Deeksha's in-laws had some land. The father-in-law and all six of his sons used to work in the fields. Women were not allowed to work outside the home. After her father-in-law died, the land was divided between the sons and Deeksha and her husband moved to Delhi as it was difficult to manage in the village because of the paltry amount of land that they got. In fact, Deeksha convinced her husband to move to Delhi as she knew from her earlier experience of the city that she would easily get jobs as a maid. With the help of a relative Deeksha's husband managed to find a job as a security guard and the family moved to Delhi. Soon after Deeksha managed to get a job at the residence of a professor's family who lived inside a university campus. During this time Deeksha got in touch with a non-governmental organization (NGO) that helped Deeksha to start studying and achieve basic literacy, but she could not continue her studies after the birth of her first child. Deeksha's husband had reservations about her association with the NGO and her decision to continue her studies. He had been drinking and abusing her on a regular basis all these years. He was also extremely suspicious and jealous of Deeksha as she was much younger than him and a very friendly and capable woman liked by all.

As her children grew older, Deeksha started working in more households. Seeing her ability to manage things, the NGO offered Deeksha some work in a creche run by them. In the meantime, Deeksha was introduced to a local church and started going there quite often. She also started doing cleaning work for this church to earn more money. Before the 2020 lockdown, Deeksha used to earn about 26,000 rupees per month: 15,000 from domestic work and another 11,000 from the church and the NGO. Her husband used to earn 12,000 rupees per month. Though Deeksha never revealed to her husband her income from the church and the NGO, he could guess that she had been earning substantially. In revenge, he started to contribute only 5,000 rupees towards the house rent. Even after taking care of all other expenditures, Deeksha managed to save substantially. She has three bank accounts: two are in the names of her two children and one in her own name. Her husband managed to get hold of Deeksha's bank account details and often withdraws money from it. So, Deeksha keeps only small amounts in this account and has shifted her main savings to the accounts of her children. She has also started keeping some money for emergencies with one of her employers. In addition, Deeksha has joined a women's committee, an informal self-help group for saving money, quite popular among poor slum-dwelling women in Delhi. She has developed a very good network among her neighbours, most of whom are also domestic workers and committee members and most of whose husbands also have irregular incomes, are abusive, and have drinking habits. The women have developed a bond among themselves helping out each other in times of need. This networking was of great help during the pandemic recession.

During the first lockdown in 2020, Deeksha lost all her jobs in the university campus and not a single employer paid Deeksha her salary for the months of April and May. Her husband also lost

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<sup>7</sup> It is quite possible that the uncle sold Deeksha to this older widowed man. For a discussion on related cases, see Roy (2008) and Chakravarty and Chakravarty (2015).

his job. Deeksha continued working with the NGO and they offered her a full salary. There was extra work in the NGO from pandemic-related relief work and Deeksha volunteered as a relief worker. The church paid Deeksha half her salary and gave her a substantial amount of dry food rations. One of her employers also gave her about 15 days' dry ration. Deeksha's family has a ration card as well.<sup>8</sup> So, altogether she could manage without touching her savings. In fact, her family received too much dry rations so Deeksha distributed the surplus among her needy neighbours. Since her husband was at home all day he soon found out about Deeksha's involvement with the NGO and the church and opposed it vehemently. Deeksha says: 'my husband was not earning anything during the 3 months of lockdown. But he must be having some savings as he was getting his drinks quite regularly and used to enjoy with his friends. He did not contribute a paisa for household expenditure during this time'.

After the 2020 lockdown, initially Deeksha could not get back any of the domestic jobs she was employed in earlier. Later, Deeksha managed to get some work but her income from domestic services was half of what she earned before the pandemic. Her husband, with some effort, got his job back after 3 months. Deeksha informed us that most domestic workers have got back some jobs after the lockdown and the situation is improving slowly. She sounded quite confident that her job situation would improve in the near future.

During the lockdown-like situation in early 2021, Deeksha's husband lost his job again but she was able to retain most of her jobs except for one case where the university student who employed her as a cook returned home after completing their studies. Deeksha found it difficult to make ends meet during the second wave in early 2021 as her supplementary income from the church and the NGO also decreased significantly. She had to spend money from her savings. By August 2021, she had taken the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine and hoped to get back a sufficient number of jobs after the second dose. Deeksha's husband was still jobless and he started threatening her that he would go back to his extended family with their children. Deeksha said she did not really care about her husband leaving her in Delhi alone as she had a fairly good network and she would easily manage on her own, especially when there was every hope that the job market would revive soon. However, she would never let him take their children. Deeksha was confident that if he tried to take their children with him, her neighbours and friends including other domestic workers she knew would stand with her in solidarity.

In this case, we see the possibility of a family breaking down in the context of the pandemic. But this is not a case of a woman being abandoned in the sense noted by Mahalanobis (1946) and discussed by Greenough (1980), in the context of the Bengal Famine of 1943. Agarwal (2008) conceives this issue of family dissolution during the Bengal Famine of 1943 as one pertaining to cooperative conflicts in the household, where women have limited or no capacity to exercise their agency role, due to lack of control over material resources. However, Deeksha has achieved a certain kind of agency from her experience and labour and she is in no way dependent on her husband's support.

### 4.3 Category 3

#### *Marjina*

Marjina Bivi is a 40-year-old Muslim woman who used to live in a village in Lower Assam before migrating to Delhi. Married at 12 years of age, Marjina had to work as an agricultural labourer in

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<sup>8</sup> As a central government relief measure, rations for existing card holders were doubled and were provided free of cost at this point.

the village in Assam as her marital family had a very small plot of land not sufficient for subsistence. She studied until the 8th standard and had her first child at the age of 14 years. Her husband who used to be a labourer as well was never very responsible towards the family. He went away to Delhi alone leaving the family behind and came back only after 3 years. Marjina was working in the fields and raising their two children with little support from her in-laws. It was difficult to get regular wage work in the village because there were hardly any large-hold farmers who would hire wage labour throughout the year. Wage rates were also quite low because of the lack of demand. Marjina heard about the possibility of getting jobs as a domestic worker in Delhi, where a friend of hers had moved with her family. When her husband finally came home Marjina insisted that he should take the family with him to the city. Marjina moved to Delhi 15 years ago. They initially lived with a friend and then got a shelter in the masjid (mosque) in a slum in south-west Delhi where they later got a small place to live. Marjina's husband started working as a garbage collector in the nearby apartments. Initially the husband fed the family but Marjina soon searched for work with the help of the neighbours in the *jhuggi*. Her children were grown up to some extent and Marjina managed to work in five households. Just before the 2020 lockdown she was earning about 15,000 rupees per month. Soon after Marjina started working, her husband lost his job because he was very irregular. Afterwards he tried to sell vegetables and fruit for some time. But nothing worked for him as [Marjina told us] he 'has bad habits: he goes to a woman and spends whatever he earns on her'; he also spends on alcohol. Marjina tried to counsel him with the help of the Imam of the masjid because everyone in the slum listens to him. But nothing worked for Marjina's husband. He used to shout at her and beat her quite often. Domestic violence, however, became less frequent as the children grew older and became an important source of support for Marjina.

Because her husband never contributed regularly to the family budget Marjina's role became crucial and she assumed the role of the breadwinner in the family. She educated her children to the extent possible and got her daughter married to a *thelawala* (mobile vendor of different goods) who earns regularly and looks after her daughter. With great satisfaction Marjina mentioned that her son-in-law does not allow her daughter to work outside the home. However, Marjina still regards her husband as the head of the family despite taking all major decisions on her own, often going against her husband's will. Marjina started saving as much as she could after she started working and was able to hide these savings from her drunken and abusive husband.

In this case, again, we see that the woman of the household cannot be considered dependent in any way even before she moved to the city. Marjina's role in the family is not only important but pivotal. She is well aware of this fact. She repeatedly mentioned that forcing her husband to move to the city was the right decision. They would have died of hunger if they stayed back in the village. (Marjina's exact expression in Bangla was '*kbider chote morei jitaam*', we would have died of hunger.)

Marjina lost all her jobs during the first lockdown in March 2020. None of her employers paid her, except in March. During April and May 2020, nobody in her family had any income. They were primarily managing with the dry ration provided by the government and the cooked food offered by a rich man. Marjina managed not to touch her savings so long as dole was available.

After the first lockdown only three of the five employer households re-employed Marjina. And in her post-lockdown terms of contract, both her workload and hours of work as well as her salary were reduced. She managed to earn only 4,000 rupees a month. As neither her husband nor son were able to get their jobs back, Marjina suggested they start a small eatery on a portable van, selling onion and potato *pakorey* (deep-fried snacks). She invested almost all her savings to set up this business. The family somehow survived on this business from mid-2020 to mid-2021. As her husband does not have any independent income, he stays home most of the time. Marjina had to be vigilant that her husband does not abscond with any money to spend on drinks and other habits. They fought over this almost every day but Marjina somehow ensured that no money was wasted.

During the second wave of the pandemic in April–May 2021 the situation became even worse. Marjina lost all her jobs once again. They survived on the little income from their eatery and the meagre savings that Marjina still had. But even before the second wave curfew was called off Marjina started getting calls from her employers. As mentioned earlier, the employers started negotiating with the RWAs to let Marjina and other domestic maids enter the premises. Marjina started getting back her jobs slowly but she was worried about her small business because in her absence things could go wrong very easily.

Marjina and her husband had no assets when they came to the city. Apart from some social and religious networks they did not have any other fall-back position either. But the relative stability of income from domestic service and Marjina's own effort to save as much as possible over the years helped her develop a stronger fall-back position not only for herself but also for the family. This significantly influenced the family's ability to cope with the food insecurity and uncertainty of the pandemic recession. However, even though Marjina achieved a significant level of agency through her work she is still highly influenced by the *perception* that she needs to keep the family together. In this case, Marjina is actually in a position to abandon her husband but she will never do that as the family is extremely important to her. If she could step away from these social perceptions she could enjoy a much higher level of well-being, more so in the context of the pandemic.

In each of the above-mentioned cases, the women domestic workers appreciate the significance of their more or less secure independent income from paid domestic service irrespective of their husbands' income status. The significance of domestic service in strengthening fall-back positions and also agency roles of these women turned out to be even more crucial in the context of the pandemic. Taking a cue from Sen's idea of cooperative conflicts, Agarwal (2008) explained the phenomenon of large-scale abandonment of women and children leading to family desolations during the Bengal famine of 1943 as an outcome of women's very weak or absent fall-back positions in the wake of the famine compared with men. Our findings during another calamity, induced by the recent COVID-19 pandemic in the context of poor urban families of women domestic workers, offer a sharp contrast. In all the four case studies discussed, women have achieved an independent fall-back position not only for themselves but often for the family as a whole because of their engagement in paid domestic service. This is juxtaposed with husbands who have faced a decline in their fall-back positions for different reasons induced by the pandemic barring one (Kamlesh). Consequently, intra-household outcomes of the pandemic turn out to be significantly different from those of the Bengal famine of 1943.

## 5 Conclusion

Domestic workers, including those whose case studies are described in this paper, come from circumstances of meagre personal resources. Among our respondents, bar none, land assets in the village were too limited to serve as a viable source of livelihood. It was marriage or difficult economic circumstances that led them to move to the city and later to take on domestic work, a commonly resorted to type of work for women in urban areas in India especially after the 1990s liberalized macroeconomic regime.

Domestic work provides a relatively stable income compared with the other precarious jobs in the informal economy in which men and women are mostly engaged. At the very least, the respondents suggested they were optimistic about getting back work, even in cases where work had been lost due to the pandemic. In the case of most of the women we interacted with, domestic service was a significant contributor in the family budget before the lockdown of 2020. There is sufficient data

to show that these women not only do not depend on their husbands but also often take the principal responsibility of providing food and shelter for the family. In some cases, these domestic worker women could also manage to save substantially from their regular incomes. During the lockdown these women too lost jobs and income like their husbands. But given the specific nature of demand for domestic service, in most of the cases each of our respondents not only got back a substantial number of jobs immediately after the lockdowns or curfews ended but also were hopeful that they would reach previous levels of income in the coming months. As such, even though the nature of domestic work may be seen as 'reflective of', 'traditional within household divisions' (Sen 1987: 14), we suggest that these workers do indeed explicitly see their work as separate from their personal domestic care work and as significant in contributing in some measure to their economic security.

When reflecting on intra-household dynamics particularly in the context of the pandemic we observe the following. The agency these slum-dwelling women have acquired through domestic service, along with the husbands' fall-back positions often being even less secure than their own, has led them to exercise significant decision-making power, allowing them to challenge their context and thereby the outcome of unemployment that they experienced. A crucial aspect of the pandemic-induced unemployment for these domestic workers has been that the duration of their unemployment has tended to be shorter than those for several categories of work in which their husbands are engaged. As discussed in the paper, this is due to the nature of domestic work itself. However, socially ingrained perceptions about their well-being, related to keeping the family together, and the relatively indifferent importance they attribute to their contributions towards their family, do often keep working explicitly or implicitly to determine the ultimate outcome of interpersonal dynamics at the household level. This has significant implications for a processual understanding of empowerment.

None of the above is stated, however, to deny the backdrop of virtually permanent precarity that domestic workers negotiate. It is also the case that as a category of workers, despite being large in number, domestic workers have been overlooked by governments for pandemic relief cash transfers of the kind offered to construction workers in several states in India and to transport workers in Delhi. The non-payment of these cash transfers to domestic workers highlights the wilful invisibilization of these workers by the state. A key excuse for non-payment has been that a reliable state-recognized record of domestic workers did not exist in 2020. But this was hardly a tenable justification. The central or state governments need only to have demonstrated some political will and commitment to using the provisions of the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008 after it was passed, rather than waiting for a calamity to strike. The new e-Shram portal of the Ministry of Labour and Employment (see Government of India 2021) attempts to address this lacuna but the nature of cash transfers that may be initiated via this database remains to be seen. Both the central and state governments also performed poorly on other elementary forms of social protection such as food transfers, particularly to those who did not already hold public distribution system (PDS) ration cards under the National Food Security Act, 2013 (see Nayak 2022). Some food rations were provided to non-PDS card holders but in a manner that can at best be described as miserly. Administrative mechanisms should have been found to make more generous free food rations available to domestic workers who did not already have a ration card before 2020.

It also needs to be noted that domestic workers as a category are workers in whom the state invests absolutely nothing. No training or infrastructure is demanded by this category of workers. They are self-trained and self-sufficient. Yet, this category of workers is treated poorly. The new Labour Code initiated by the Government of India too offers them little recognition and no specific protections. At present, then, their fall-back positions are quite substantially being strengthened by dint of their own agency role alone.

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## Appendix A

Table A1: Timeline of pandemic lockdowns and government orders in India from March 2020 to April 2021

Date	Order issued	Department (Source)
24 March 2020	Government of India issues orders for a 21-day nationwide lockdown. Order issued as per the Disaster Management Act, 2005, states, 'All enforcing authorities to note that <i>these strict restrictions fundamentally relate to the movement of people . . .</i> '	Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (PIB 2020a)
26 March 2020	Announcement of 'Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana' (relief measures from the Prime Minister's Office), including free food grain rations, double the usual monthly entitlement, for <i>holders</i> of ration cards for subsidized food grain (relief measures for existing ration card holders); no measures were announced for those who did not already possess ration cards or interstate migrant workers who were unable to access ration.	Ministry of Finance, Government of India (PIB 2020b)
14–15 April 2020	Extension of lockdown till 3 May 2020, and consolidated guidelines issued on prohibited activities—restrictions for all movement by buses and trains; Ministry of Home Affairs permits state/UT governments to assess which areas are to be deemed 'containment zones' as per guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.	Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (MoHA 2020a)
13–17 May 2020	'Atmanirbhar Bharat' relief package announced by the Ministry of Finance, Government of India, with food relief announced for 2 months for migrant workers without ration cards. NB: From the time of announcement of lockdown on 24 March 2020, the migrant crisis had continued, unabated.	Ministry of Finance, Government of India (MoF 2020)
30 May 2020	Government order, 'unlock 1', permitting restricted movement outside containment zones from 8 June 2020, including intrastate and interstate movement of persons and goods; state/UT governments directed to impose restrictions as per their assessment.	Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (MoHA 2020b)
29 June 2020	Government order, 'unlock 2', permitting further easing of public movement outside containment zones from 1 July 2020, specifically, re-opening of some training institutes run by central and state governments, while the lockdown remained in force in containment zones till 31 July 2020.	Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (MoHA 2020c)
29 July 2020	Government order, 'unlock 3', removing curfews at night. NB: In real terms, significant restrictions on movement of people remained in force.	Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (MoHA 2020d)
23 March 2021	Government order detailing a Test–Track–Treat protocol, and promotion of vaccination to contain a new surge in cases. NB: Following the criticism of the stringent lockdowns imposed in 2020, the central government in 2021 emphasized entrusting state or UT administrators with declaration of 'containment zones' on a localized basis. This was to be combined with a 'Test–Track and Trace' policy, along with encouraging vaccinations. However only a limited free vaccination programme was in operation till June 2021. Instead of a universally available free vaccination programme, the central government pushed a paid vaccination programme via private hospitals, while free vaccines were made available on a limited basis. In Delhi, as the collapse of the healthcare system became more and more dire and apparent in March/April 2021, the central government also issued notifications related to access to oxygen and drugs like remdesivir.	Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (MoHA 2021a)
29 April 2021	Government order re-emphasizing enforcement of public health measures by state governments, implying thereby that state governments were responsible for ensuring COVID-19-appropriate public safety measures.	Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (MoHA 2021b)

Note: UT, union territories.

Source: authors' compilation based on data sources cited.

## Appendix B

Table B1: Study data collected

Name	Marital status, religion	Age (in years)	Age at marriage (in years)	Education	History of paid work	Income before 2020 lockdown (in rupees)	Income after 2020 lockdown (in rupees)	Whether paid for lockdown period	Further comments, including nature of husband's work
W1	Married, Hindu	40	14	Illiterate	DW only after marriage	14,000 from 3 jobs	3,000 from 1 job	1 HH paid for 3 months	Husband, a security guard in a factory, has an Employee State Insurance card (indicating secure employment)
W2	Married, Hindu	38	13	6th standard	DW after marriage	19,000 from 6 HHs and tiffin service for students	7,500 from 3 HHs	1 HH paid for 1 month; no payment at all from 5 HHs	Husband is a contractual sanitation worker in a Delhi University college
W3	Married, Hindu	50	16	Illiterate	Only DW	13,000 from 4 HHs	Unemployed	No payment during 2020 lockdown	Husband is unemployed for several years, was earlier a driver
W4	Married, Hindu	55	14	Illiterate	Only DW	15,000 from 8 jobs	2 HHs, income unclear	No payment during 2020 lockdown	Husband is a daily wage porter at Old Delhi Railway Station; no information on income; was also working during the 2020 lockdown
W5	Married, Hindu	40	20	Primary school	Only DW after marriage	8,000 from 1 HH	Unemployed	Paid for 3 months—March, April, May 2020, but employer HH later employed a full-time worker	Husband is a permanent employee in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi
W6	Married, Hindu	27	17–18	5th standard	DW after marriage	5,000 from 3 HHs	5,500 from 3 HHs	Paid for 1 month by each HH	Husband is a contractual sanitation worker, as is widowed sister-in-law who lives with W6 and husband
W7	Widow, Christian	56	Early 20s	9th standard	Worked in American embassy as a cook	6,000 from 4 HHs	1,500 from 1 HH?	One HH paid for April and May	Widow, with no other adult to fall back on
W8	Married, Hindu	40	15	2nd standard	DW after marriage	10,000 from 4 HHs	10,000 from 4 HHs	All HHs paid for April, May, and June	Husband was a contractual sanitation worker in Delhi University's north campus; currently unemployed (March 2021)

W9	Married, Hindu	37	15	10th standard	DW after marriage	9,000 from 1 HH	6,000 from 1 HH	Was paid for 3 months	Husband works at a photocopy shop at a Delhi University college
W10	Married, Hindu	32	17–18	5th standard	DW after marriage	6,000 from 4 HHs	3,000 from 2 HHs	No payment for lockdown period	Husband is a painter
W11	Married, Hindu	33	18	5th standard	DW after marriage	5,000 from 3 HHs	5,000 from 4 HHs	No payment for lockdown period	Husband works as a cook on contract basis; during the lockdown, husband got no work as a cook and worked as a <i>palledar</i> (headloader)
W12	Married, Hindu	36	19–20	10th standard	Worked in a cream manufacturing company for 3 years before marriage.	7,000 from 7 HHs	Called back by 2 HHs in May, another 2 in June, and the last 3 in July 2020	Partially paid by 3 HHs in April, by 2 HHs in May, and by 1 HH in June 2020; by July 2020, was back at work in the same HHs as earlier	Husband works at a photocopy shop
W13	Married, Hindu	32	17	2nd standard	DW after marriage	2,400 from 1 HH	5,400 from 3 HHs	No payment for 3 months during lockdown	Husband works as a <i>halwai</i> (cook)
W14	Married, Hindu	30	15–16	8th standard	DW since 5 years ago	7,000 from 1 HH	5,000 from 2 HHs	No payment during the lockdown	Nature of husband's work is unclear; husband abandoned home soon after the lockdown started, on 25 July 2020, and has never returned nor been found; the family does not know why nor his whereabouts
W15	Widow, Hindu	33	21	8th standard	DW after lockdown 2020 started (husband died)	Did not work before the lockdown	5,000 from 2 HHs	No payment during lockdown (was not employed during lockdown)	Nature of husband's work unclear; before lockdown, husband used to earn about 12,000 rupees, then he inexplicably died; appeared to be suicide, aided by alcohol abuse, after lockdown 2020 started
W16	Widow, Hindu	42	19	8th standard	DW after husband's death 5 years ago	7,000 from 1 HH	5,000 from 2 HHs	Full payment for 2 months	W16 was offered full-time work, which she did not take up; husband died a few years ago; he used to work as a photographer in Haryana; after his death the family moved to Delhi since W16's brother lives here
W17	Married, Hindu	27	18	8th standard	DW a few years ago, after marriage	10,000 from 3 HHs	Unemployed	No payment during the lockdown	W17 was unemployed as on March 2021; husband runs a food cart ( <i>pakorey ka thela</i> )

W18	Married, Hindu	31	14	Illiterate	DW after marriage, managed home-care work before marriage since mother was a DW	4,500 from 2 HHs	5,000 from 1 HH	No payment from 1 HH; another HH gave consolidated payment for 5 months after the lockdown	Husband is a daily wage worker, in a packers and movers company earning 400 rupees a day.
W19	Married, Hindu	29	19-20	5th standard	DW well before marriage	26,000 from 5 HHs, an NGO, and a church	5,500 from 2 HHs working as a cook	Only 1 HH gave ration, she continued work in the NGO since they were doing relief work	Husband works as security guard; for a while after the lockdown, W19 earned 8,000 rupees from 3 HHs working as a cook, 2,500 rupees from the church, and 5,000 rupees from the NGO, but then lost 1 HH and the church and NGO stopped paying her
W20	Married, Hindu	32	18	Illiterate	Brief work as agricultural worker before marriage	16,000 from 3 HHs and an office (coaching centre)	6,300 from 3 HHs	No income during lockdown	Husband works as a shop helper
W21	Married, Muslim	34	12	7th standard	DW since marriage	7,400 from 4 HHs	7,400 from 4 HHs	No income for April and May 2020	W21 started working again in June 2020
W22	Married, Muslim	40	14	Illiterate	DW after marriage	12,000 from 3 HHs	12,000 from 3 HHs	Full payment from all 3 HHs for the lockdown	Husband works as a rag picker
W23	Widow, Hindu	37	15	Illiterate	Worked after marriage, but initially as a press-wali (ironing lady) in Delhi	8,800 from 7 HHs and 800 from ironing clothes	8,800 from 7 HHs	No payment for April 2020, then was paid from May onwards by the same HHs	2,300 rupees from 2 HHs after the 2021 lockdown; W23 is a widow; husband died about 11 years ago
W24	Married, Hindu	45	12	Illiterate	DW after marriage	13,000 from 8 HHs	7,800 from 3 HHs	4 HHs gave partial payment or ration	Husband works as a painter with contractors
W25	Separated, trying to get divorced, Hindu	34	13	5th standard	DW after marriage	12,400 from 4 HHs	10,000 from 2 HHs	Full payment for 1 month—April 2020, from 1 HH (where she earned 10,000); in May and June only token payment of about 500 or 1,000 from the HHs	W25 is separated from her husband and is trying to get divorced in the hope that he will stop harassing her
W26	Widow, Hindu	56	19	11th standard	Worked as a nurse after husband's death	12,000 for 12 hours	Unemployed in March 2021 when interviewed	No payment during lockdown	W26 is a widow; children are adults and they earn

W27	Married, Hindu	42	15.5	6th standard	DW before marriage	9,500 from 3 HHs	7,500 from 2 HHs	No payment during the lockdown	After the 2021 lockdown, W27's income reduced to 6,000 from 1 HH (for care work); husband used to run an e-rickshaw before the lockdown; he had unstable income, sometimes earning around 300 rupees per day, but some days he did not earn anything
W28	Separated, Muslim	40	13–14	5th standard	Worked after marriage, initially in a jeans factory	4,000 from 3 HHs and 3,000 from garment factory	3,000 from 3 HHs	Token partial payment made by 2 HHs once in the 2020 lockdown, then no payment, but she got work back in the same 3 HHs	Separated from husband; adult children do work, but incomes were badly affected during lockdown
W29	Married, Hindu	36	18–19	Illiterate	Unpaid family labour helping in husband's shop in Delhi	9,500 from 5 HHs	9,000 from 5 HHs	Not paid during the lockdown	Husband used to put up a stall at a weekly market, but is an alcoholic and has not been doing so for some time now
W30	Married, Hindu	48	25	7th standard	Before DW used to work in a tiffin service where she used to make chappattis (flatbreads)	4,000 from 1 HH	4,000 from 1 HH	Full payment from the HH during the lockdowns, since she continued to work	W30 continued to work during both lockdowns as she lives quite close to her employer; husband works as a security guard; lost his job in the 2020 lockdown
W31	Not married, Hindu	22	NA	8th standard	Did paid agricultural labour in village before moving to the city and starting DW	7,400 from 4 HHs	7,400 from 4 HHs	No payment for April and May 2020 from any employer; she went back to work in June 2020	W31 is not married

Note: W, worker; DW, domestic worker; HH, household; NA, not applicable.

Source: authors' compilation based on study fieldwork and interviews.