

New report reveals devastating impact of COVID-19 on Delhi's informal workers

COVID-19 devastated workers' livelihoods and forced them into economic freefall. According to WIEGO's research, in April 2020, 99% of domestic workers weren't able to work, as well as 90% of street vendors and almost 70% of waste pickers, with little relief from government.

New Delhi, India. February 22, 2021.- When the COVID-19 crisis struck and India was locked down in March 2020, nearly 5 million Delhi residents who work in the informal economy¹ faced near-total loss of work, depletion of savings and debilitating hunger. Groundbreaking research conducted by WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) shines a light on what these essential [workers experienced](#): a near total loss of work and income almost overnight, followed by a painfully slow recovery.

Shalini Sinha, WIEGO's India Country Representative, explained how the vast majority of workers were unable to find work for even a single day in April 2020: "In some industries, work came to an immediate standstill. Our data showed 99% of domestic workers weren't able to work, as well as 90% of street vendors and almost 70% of waste pickers. Earnings fell off a cliff, leaving these workers - many of whom are already poor - with no money to feed their families."

The WIEGO study, [which focussed on 12 cities around the world](#), found that by June there was some recovery, but nowhere near pre-crisis levels. Domestic workers who used to work on average six-day weeks before lockdown were able to only work between 2-3 days, while street vendors and waste pickers were only finding work 3-4 days a week. Home-based workers were hardest hit, with most not finding even a day's work.

Now, informal workers, activists and informal economy experts from Delhi are calling for an inclusive recovery from COVID-19. In a webinar organised by [WIEGO Focal City Delhi](#), the panel reflected on how workers survived COVID-19, considered the continuing impact on their lives, and the difficult road back to work.

Jagruti Devi, a waste picker in Delhi, who used to sort dry waste in a godown near her home, took up additional work as a domestic worker after the lockdown and also works with her husband who vends vegetables now, in addition to waste picking. Despite all this, her income remains well below pre-crisis levels and her challenges become larger. "I didn't have a ration card, you had to have a smartphone to apply for a ration card. We had to buy a smartphone, even if we had no work or income, to be able to educate our children. We had saved money and our children had saved money in their piggy banks, so we put all of that together and we bought the phone," she explained.

Pravin Kumar, a street vendor in Delhi, sells cold drinks near the famous Lotus temple in Delhi. He was only able to resume vending in January 2021, 9 months after the lockdown and that too, for only 2 hours a day. With barely any tourists and a persisting fear of infection from street food and drink, his earnings are negligible compared to pre-lockdown levels. "I only started vending a few days ago. I am only able to work for half a day, because Lotus temple only opens from 4 to 6 in the evening. Because there are no tourists, then you also have no customers or earnings. There used to be hundreds of visitors to the Temple and now there are 20 or 25 a day, only Indian tourists and no foreigners," he said.

¹ Govindan Raveendran and Joann Vanek. 2020. Informal Workers in India: A Statistical Profile. WIEGO Statistical Brief No. 24. Available at https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/WIEGO_Statistical_Brief_N24_India.pdf



The extended lockdown increased hunger and household responsibilities, with the burden of care for children, the sick, and elderly increasing. This work fell predominantly to women, as Mira Chatterjee, Director of Social Security, SEWA & Chair, WIEGO Board described: “With children still at home, and particularly young children, having all the centers and creches shut down has been a huge issue for women, particularly informal women workers who cannot work if these services are not available. They also need support for older children because they have had to help with the school work tutoring. The data shows there has been a 66% increase in care work among informal women.”

Even after the easing of lockdown and gradual reopening of the economy, recovery for informal workers has been slow and difficult. Continuing low earnings, increased care burden and little or no access to long-term support means that the impact of the pandemic on informal workers persists and has long-term implications.

How to recover?

To aid recovery, many informal workers’ organizations and allies have articulated a policy roadmap for recovery, including the following demands:

- Enable livelihood opportunities through support to restart livelihoods for the different categories of workers – open markets and vending zones, sorting spaces for waste pickers and community work-stations, and provide support to workers’ organizations to ensure these workspaces are safe and secure; and providing workers with credit access.
- Minimise health risks by ensuring access to water and sanitation facilities at both homes and informal worksites, and ensure provision of personal protective equipment and sanitisers to all workers.
- Recognise and regularise informal workers by bringing all under the ambit of national labour laws and regulations which mandate the right to decent work and pay. Extend and facilitate access to social security, especially child care and health insurance, for all informal workers. Recognize migrant workers and facilitate their access to government relief programmes and schemes.
- Recognize and support informal livelihoods in the city by promoting labour-intensive growth and ensuring access to safe and secure workspaces, including in public space, with basic services.

Dr. Amit Basole, Associate Professor of Economics at the School of Liberal Studies from Azim Premji University, Bangalore, explained how the impact has been the most severe over the people that can bear it the least: “There is still a lot of room and need to do more. Another round of cash transfers is not too late. The transfers given were very low and they did not reach a lot of people. People lost up to 3 months of income, and the amount of the transfer does not compensate. Loans act as a debt burden, it doesn't really solve the problem. There also should be an employment program in the cities.” His recommendation is to invest in the most affected: “If we spend money now, we address a livelihood crisis, we put money in people's pockets, we spur spending from the bottom up -where it matters most- which will create the necessary tax revenues, that will later on address the fiscal deficit.”

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Editor's note

The devastating effect of the COVID-19 crisis has been captured in a [12-city global study](#) on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis conducted by WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing). WIEGO Focal City Delhi coordinated the research in Delhi, in partnership with SEWA Delhi, Janpahal, and the Delhi Roundtable on Solid Waste Management, interviewing 270 informal workers belonging to 4 sectors of the informal economy- domestic workers, waste pickers, street vendors and home-based workers.