

# IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON **DALITS** IN SOUTH ASIA



Asia Dalit Rights Forum



THE INCLUSIVITY  
PROJECT



# IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON **DALITS** IN SOUTH ASIA



Asia Dalit Rights Forum





November 2020

Lead Research and Author: Deepak Nikarhil

Research Contributors: Zakir Hossain, Lee  
Maqueen Paul, Vishal Kamble, Siva Pragasam,  
Bhakta Biswakarma, Zulfiquar Shah, P. P.

Sivapragasm

Concept & Advice: N. Paul Divakar, Beena  
Pallical and Aloysius Irudayam

Report Design: Black Tea Cuppa

Published by:

ASIA DALIT RIGHTS FORUM

8/1, 2nd Floor, South Patel Nagar

New Delhi, 110008 India

Tel: +91 11 4566 4341

[www.asiadalitrightsforum.org](http://www.asiadalitrightsforum.org)

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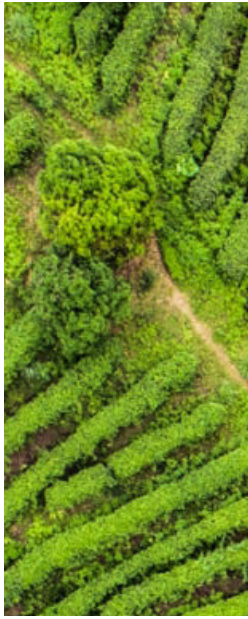


## About **Asia Dalit Rights Forum**

Asia Dalit Rights Forum (ADRF) is a platform of Dalits, and those working with Dalits in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka committed to the empowerment and emancipation of communities subjected to descent and work-based (caste-based) discrimination and violence (DWD&V). ADRF aims at addressing violations of the rights and entitlements of these communities, in particular their women and children, in the respective countries as well as worldwide. It focuses on supporting all the communities subjected to DWD&V and systemic discrimination in any part of the world in their noble aspirations and courageous struggles to establish an inclusive society that is marked by equity and equality, dignity and self-governance, justice, and freedom. ADRF is committed to collaborating with all national, regional, and international agencies- civil society organisations and human rights agencies, UN bodies, and state institutions espousing the cause of eliminating DWD and building an inclusive, peaceful and egalitarian society in Asia and elsewhere in the world.

# ABBREVIATIONS

AIDMAM	All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch
ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
CDWD	Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent
FEDO	Feminist Dalit Organisation
ILO	International Labour Organisation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SKA	Safai Karmachari Andolan

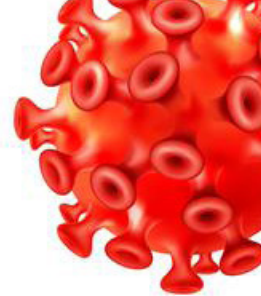


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# INTRODUCTION: IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DALITS

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The aim of this study is to monitor from point of view of human rights, nondiscrimination and access to justice for life of dignity and peace

**T**he spread of coronavirus across the globe has not only created a health crisis but has particularly affected the socio-economic and human capacities of most marginalized groups across the globe. More importantly, this virus has led to disrupting the economies, resulting in uneven impacts among the population in the developing countries of Asia. In particular, the Dalit communities in Asia have faced gruesome after effects on their human capacities and livelihood systems including their daily survival during this era of the pandemic.

Dalits are communities discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD), they are one of the most marginalized communities, with approximately 220 million people situated in Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. These communities are traditionally excluded communities based on their standing in the social hierarchy and their inherent nature of work dictated through principles of purity and pollution. These communities have been socially, economically and politically discriminated by the systemic structures and dominant communities in various forms and have sustained this

discrimination through atrocities and violence.

COVID 19 had multiple forms of impact on the Dalit communities. One of the key impacts was loss of livelihood due to lockdown and the consequent restrictions on social communication which have affected their employment and income prospects. Being unskilled and semi-skilled m labourers in both rural and urban areas, the majority of the Dalit workforce were suddenly pushed to the brink of unemployment and what made their situation worse was the less or no access to the COVID19 mitigation measures introduced and implemented in their respective countries. SDG 16.b focuses on promoting and enforcing nondiscriminatory laws and policies for the sustainable development of all individuals and groups in society. But there is a huge gap in addressing the livelihood concerns of most marginalized communities who depend mainly, and even on informal employment where government policies are less effective. The obvious result is further economic pauperization and social marginalisation of the Dalit communities.



The aim of this study is to monitor from point of view of human rights, nondiscrimination and access to justice for life of dignity and peace (a) the impact of Covid-19 on the physical and livelihood concerns – health and employment and wages - of Dalit communities with special attention to the social relation with the dominant communities; and (b) the type and quality of response of the state and civil society institutions through their Covid-19 mitigation measures.

## Background

Dalits are at the bottom of the caste system which is hierarchical system and it places individuals in a high or low social position under the notion of purity and pollution. Those who fall at the bottom of the hierarchical structure are the ones who are the most excluded communities not only in economic and political domains but also in socio-cultural processes in society. They continue to be subjected to different forms of ‘untouchability’ or social disabilities on the basis of their birth into ‘lower caste’. They also are distinguished by their segregated living spaces with severely restricted access to public and private facilities and services like housing, water and sanitation, health, education, markets, land and employment. As a consequence, there is a large gap between the general population and Dalits in terms of most human development indicators, with Dalit women at the bottom of the scale. Any resistance from the Dalits to undertake occupations assigned to them traditionally, usually results in violence.<sup>1</sup>

There are both commonalities and differences in the way that caste manifests on the ground across the region, the universal features being inequality and discrimination. Dalits in all these countries can be easily identified by the ‘un-

clean’ occupations they are forced into. Therefore, a person sweeping and lifting garbage in public places, cleaning public latrines and sewer lines, dealing with dead bodies of humans and animals, engaging in casual daily wage labour on land and elsewhere generally is a Dalit.

The monitoring research will explore the impact of COVID 19 on Dalit community, while reflecting in particular on the livelihood concerns focused on employment and wages as well as well as critically interrogating the state response to it. The Dalits are affected in multiple ways and in an intense manner as their already existing vulnerabilities have been intersecting with the new challenges posed by COVID 19 and furthered by the government’s apathy which is visible as no measures have been taken by it to address the increased complexity of the issues faced by the Dalits.

The nature of work in which Dalits are traditionally involved is precarious as it is based on caste and descent. They are not only confronted with the loss of livelihood and employment but also they face discrimination from dominant castes and the state institutions during the COVID 19 period. In this process, the situation of the Dalit woman is bereft of all human rights norms. She is affected in a multiple sense, first, because of her identity as Dalit, second because of her patriarchal position, and thirdly, she being from the lower caste in the labour class. This indicates the apathy of the states in Asian countries, where caste and descent-based oppression is prevalent, in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals agenda in an effective and inclusive manner.

<sup>1</sup> *Sustainable Development Goals: Agenda of Dalits in South Asia*. Delhi: Asia Dalit Rights Forum, 2014, <http://www.asiadalitrightsforum.org/publications.php>

Dalits are at the bottom of the caste system which is **hierarchical system** and it places individuals in a high or low social position under the **notion of purity and pollution**.



The area of violation of economic rights of the oppressed people is rather neglected by many civil society organizations, too, which work on the implementation of SDGs but without developing the intersectional approach. While addressing the vulnerabilities of Dalits relating to poverty, health, education, gender, access to justice, the most important aspect is the link between social identity and the vulnerability which unfortunately remains neglected in the purview of the state policies and programs. Also, the studies conducted during the lockdown pe-

riod by some CSOs do neither acknowledge nor go deep enough into the domain of intersectionality. Hence, what must be underlined is that without embedding the inclusive approach, any successful implementation of SDG would be incomplete. On this background, this report is expected to bring to a debate about the issues faced by Dalits during the Covid-19 period in the overall framework of SDGs but with particular reference to SDG 16.

## Rationale for Study

Protecting the livelihood aspects of employment and wages rights of people who work in the large informal sector, by ensuring the availability of social protection and other policy measures has been a major challenge for Asian region countries. The activities carried out in this sector remain out of the formally organized institutional framework. The employment in this sector includes self-employed, casual and daily wage workers, street vendors, construction workers to name a few, who do not avail of government's job security related policies and benefits such as pensions, health insurance, unemployment benefits etc.

The proportion of Informal economy is highest in South Asia standing at 77.0%. In India alone, it accounts more than 90 % and there have been no efforts to enforce minimum wage protection for the benefit of this sector.<sup>2</sup> This is evident in the Asian region that workers from marginalized section of society are involved in menial and precarious kind of work that is dictated by caste and descent considerations e.g. the cleaning work and manual scavenging is done by Dalits in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

In the COVID 19 period, most of the workers not only have lost their livelihood, but confronted with discrimination and exclusion as in the case of waste pickers and cleaning workers and other casual workers. This study will therefore focus on how livelihood and health concerns – employment and wages of the life of Dalits is im-

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<sup>2</sup> Wening Handayani. *Social Protection for Informal Workers in Asia*. Manila, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2016. August 10, 2020, , <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/203891/sp-informalworkers-asia.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



pacted by COVID 19 and what challenges they are facing due to this impact? The study also will critically examine the role of the government with regard to safeguarding the rights of Dalits. As they constitute a considerable number in the informal labour market, their concerns regarding livelihood rights become essential for our consideration so as to reach the SDG objective of “leaving no one behind” fully and holistically. The violation of their human rights and labour rights will be attributed to non-realization of SDG 16 goals that stresses on promoting inclusive society for sustainable development, SDG 8 goal that promises to ensure decent work for all and other goals pertaining to other essential rights of the people.

## Methodology

The study is planned to be conducted in the months of August-October 2020 and the final report will be submitted at the end of the consultation period in October. This study has employed different methods including data mapping, gathering and analysis. It is largely rely on secondary data with supportive case studies. The secondary data contains government reports; Reports on Sustainable Development Goals; Reports on the impact of COVID-19 on marginalized; academic papers and reports; media reports and editorials; civil society reports and private and other stakeholders’ reports, published and unpublished.

SDG16 and its relation with the access to livelihood aspects- employment and wages

Given the unprecedented widening socio-economic inequalities across the world, the SDG-16 envisages just, peaceful and inclusive societies to minimize the conflict in the world and experience sustainable development that is free from violence and exclusions. It seeks to main-

tain inclusive governance that enables sustainable development practices by accommodating and promoting aspirations of excluded groups (like dalits) and make them participants in the development process. While SDG-8 seeks to promote sustained, inclusive economic growth along with full and productive employment and aims to provide decent working conditions for all. In the light of the worst economic crisis caused by Covid-19 lockdown, the world has faced the biggest job loss ever with nearly 400 million people being unemployed across the world. Particularly the targets i.e. 16.6 developing effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels and 16.7 ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels are crucial with respect to historically disadvantaged groups like Dalits in South Asia. Ensuring their meaningful participation could help the countries in South Asia attain SDG effectively and enlarge the freedoms of people.

The target to protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including informal workers in particular women, and those in precarious employment under SDG-8 has come under serious threat during the Covid-19 lockdown. The closing down of economic activities rendered vulnerable employment into a miserable situation and pushed them into a poverty trap. Lack of social security and decent working conditions resulted in extreme forms of vulnerability during lockdown. Since the social structures of South Asian countries have peculiar characteristics of social inequalities based on caste, dalits located lowest in the hierarchy borne severe burns of displacement and dislocation arising out of Covid-19 lockdown. Most of them are now likely to push under involuntary deprivations of various kinds.



# ACCESS TO PEACE, JUSTICE AND DIGNITY IN RELATION TO LIVELIHOOD ASPECTS- EMPLOYMENT AND WAGES WITH DISCRIMINATION

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Historically due to hierarchical social arrangement of caste based graded hierarchy, the Dalits in South Asia are overrepresented in the occupations that were assigned to them by religious structures.

**F**or a meaningful realization of life with human dignity, the access to livelihood is one of the key determining factors to ensure justice and dignity for everyone. Particularly, providing access to sustainable and dignified opportunities of livelihood to socially marginalized communities is critical in a society characterized by hierarchical social arrangement in South Asian countries marked by caste. It is evident from studies that the caste based discrimination operates in hiring practices by the firms also by the state and workers belonging to socially backward communities like Dalits face biased treatment at their workplaces. The equality of opportunity and life with dignity remains unachieved aspiration for Dalits, and it also affects their livelihood. This discrimination arising out of caste notions immensely compromise the capability formation among Dalits by denying them crucial opportunities. Despite of the safeguards, the discrimination, violence and prejudices against Dalit communities is on rise

and require to be addressed through holistic policy measures in pursuit of effective implementation of SDG 16 and SDG 8.

## Social Exclusion and Dalits

The social exclusion can be understood as, when an individual is unable to actively participate in socio-economic and political functioning of the society as a result of denial of equal access to opportunities, and it is governed by the dominant groups of the society who oppress marginalized groups.<sup>4</sup> The socially excluded groups have little or no power in the hierarchy of caste. Such a deprivation goes beyond categories of income and consumption and operates through marginalization which is deeply embedded in the social structures.<sup>5</sup> Social exclusions can't be just understood through descriptions of poverty or other forms of material deprivation, but through deprivations and caste based discrimi-

## ON DALITS IN SOUTH ASIA

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nations which have been a persistent feature of the hierarchical society. It should be noted that exploitation and social exclusion varies in caste specific South Asian context. An upper caste worker may be exploited at the workplace, but for Dalit worker this exploitation works through social oppression and exclusion and they continue to remain exploited, oppressed and brutalised in different forms. This exclusion results in discriminatory practices and high degree of vulnerability among excluded groups (like dalits) affecting their livelihood and employment rights. It can be understood from the employment pattern in South Asian countries.

The notion of purity and impurity is translated into division of labour that leads to assign degrading forms of work to dalits. The one example of degrading and humiliating work is manual scavenging (cleaning work) in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and plantation work in Sri Lanka. The employment pattern in informal economy suggest the fact that the discrimination based of work and descent is reinforced via degrading and low paid work, menial work in urban and rural labour market.

## The background of Informal Economy in South Asia

South Asia represents a large workforce that constitutes almost 23 % of the global labour force. The economy of the region is divided into two sectors, the formal sector that is relatively small and protected with institutional measures

South Asia represents a **large workforce** that constitutes almost 23 % of the global labour force.



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<sup>4</sup> Marya Buvinic. Social Exclusion in Latin America: The John Hopkins University Press, 2016, pp. 3-32,

<sup>5</sup> Robert Chambers. Editorial Introduction: Vulnerability, Coping and Policy. IDS Bulletin, April 1989, <https://open-docs.ids.ac.uk/opensdocs/handle/20.500.12413/9551>

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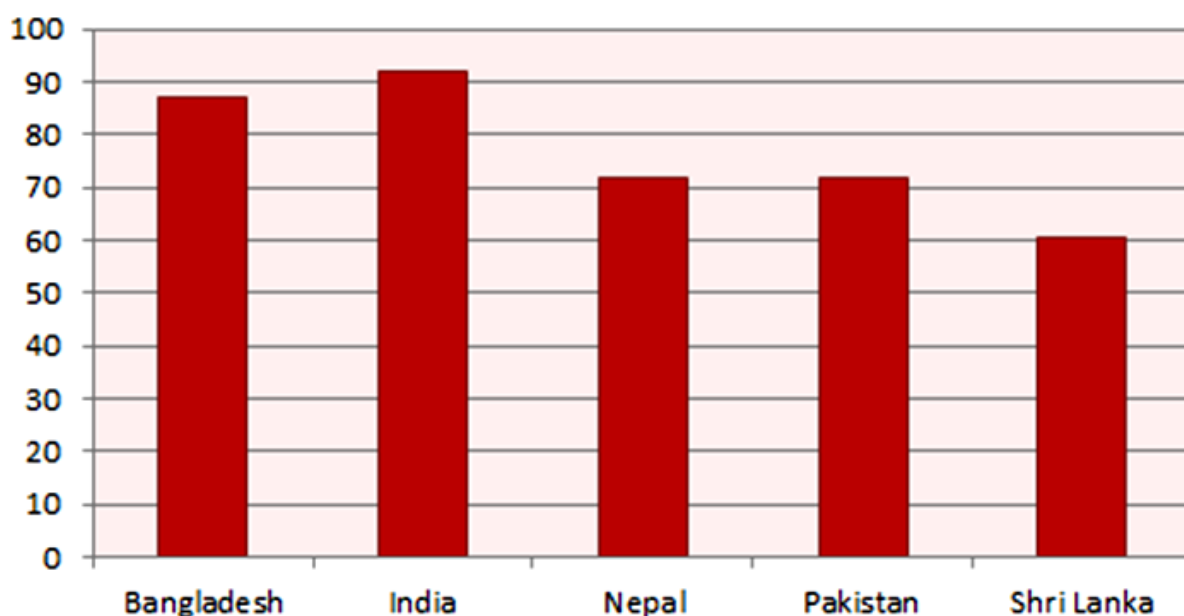


and other is informal sector that remains unprotected with employing large numbers of workers.<sup>6</sup>

The ILO report on Decent Work and the Informal Economy points out, “while informal workers are a very diverse group and they are not recognized or protected under the legal and regulatory frameworks.” Informal forms of employment encompass street vendor, domestic workers, agricultural labourers, cleaning

foundation of liberal trade and globalization, were supposed to generate high rates of economic growth, which would also create more employment opportunities and decent wages for all but the policies could not bring expected changes, on the contrary it resulted into increased casual and contract work with reducing formal sector jobs.<sup>8</sup> The nature of the economy in South Asian countries is rather complex as the work is divided and assigned on the basis of identity like caste, religion, gender.<sup>9</sup>

### Informal Employment in South Asia



Source: Constructed from ILO Employment Data on Informal Sector

workers, taxi drivers etc. Labour issues have not been seen as serious concern in informal sector and trade union activities, collective bargaining potential of worker are relatively less visible compared to formal sector. The absence of comprehensive legislation which would guarantee a minimum condition of work has been a serious issue of informal economy has not been addressed adequately.<sup>7</sup>

The economic reforms of the 1990s that led the

As constructed from ILO employment data on Informal Sector, In India the number of informal sector workers accounted highest in the region around 92% while in Bangladesh it is 87%, Nepal and Paki-



The occupations such as cleaning, shoe making/repairing, fishing, washing, pottery, pig rearing, bamboo basket making, and casual labour are some of the main occupations Dalits are engaged in.



stan it is estimated 72% & 71.7% respectively and Sri Lanka it is accounted as 60.8%.

Predominantly in India, but also in other South Asian countries, the caste system define the identity of a person, it governs all aspects of life, who they may marry, and what they can do. The graded hierarchy of caste system that is closely associated with the notion of purity and impurity has translated into occupation segregation and wage discrimination between castes in India, it restrict the labour mobility between the occupations.<sup>10</sup> Caste and gender norms also restrict the work of women with assigning primary responsibility of care and household work.

### Locating Dalits in the informal economy

As mentioned in the earlier section, there is segmentation of the market in terms of sector, gender, region, caste, religion, tribe and location. Historically due to hierarchical social arrangement of caste based graded hierarchy, the Dalits in South Asia are overrepresented in the occupations that were assigned to them by religious structures. These occupations are characterized with low skills involving intensive manual labour with no requirement of formal education. Some of these professions continue to be stigmatized with the idea of purity and pollution attached

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<sup>6</sup> Martha Chen and Donna Doane. Informality in South Asia: A Review. WIEGO, 2008, <https://www.wiego.org/publications/informality-south-asia-review-0>

<sup>7</sup> Decent Work and the Informal Economy (Report VI, ILO conference, 90th session): Geneva. International Labour Organisation, 2002,

<sup>8</sup> Sharit Bhowmik. Dignifying Discontent of Informal Labour (Informal Labour, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India by Rina Agarwala): New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013

<sup>9</sup> Martha Chen and Donna Doane. Informality in South Asia: A Review. WIEGO, 2008, <https://www.wiego.org/publications/informality-south-asia-review-0>

<sup>10</sup> Maitreyi Das & Puja Dutta. Does Caste Matter for Wages in the Informal Labor Market. Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2007.

to it. The profession of cleaning or Scavenging work, leather work, disposing dead animals is still carried out by these castes. The lower levels of education and requisite skills forces them to end up in informal sectors jobs such as street vending, casual labour, agricultural labour and other servicing labour practices that continue to be socially enforced. Further the systematic perpetuation of these practices by the state renders Dalit overrepresented in the stigmatized professions and persist the caste based divisions in the already segmented labour markets characterized by high proportion of informal labour. According to India's Human Development Survey of 2011, higher number of Dalits and other low castes are engaged in low skill occupations and services while higher castes outnumbered in the professions and occupations that fetches relatively better income and social protection provided by the employers. The low skill professions included construction workers, street vendors, petty entrepreneurs, casual laborer, shop floor workers earning meager salaries and other servicing professions that do not earn adequate income for decent survival.

The caste based division of work permeates in Bangladesh. The country hosts around 6.5 million Dalit population engaged professions that are tied to their caste identity. This exposed them to extreme forms of vulnerability in times of crisis and rendered them into the worst form of deprivation. Since the occupations they are engaged in largely involve daily earned income, the sudden and unexpected lockdown caused by COVID-19 rendered them into helpless situations where they had no option other than relying on government or other non-government organizations for survival. Further, the lower levels of education aggravate other important issues like sanitation and health. The report by Nagrik Udyog highlights multidimensional deprivation such as sudden job loss resulting in loss of livelihood, lack of safety equipment to those engaged in essential services like cleaning work and stigma attached with identity based

occupations.<sup>11</sup>

Since caste based social arrangement is integral part of Hindu religion, Nepal is no exception to the plight of Dalit population. Nepal consists considerable amount of Dalit community population and continues to suffer from multiple forms of discrimination arising out of caste practices. Nearly 42% live below the national poverty line and are exposed to risk of hunger in case of losing livelihood. The studies have shown that women remain worst affected as they have to face multiple levels of deprivation in society.<sup>12</sup>

The dehumanizing practice of manual scavenging that refers to cleaning, carrying, disposing or handling human excreta and cleaning septic tanks, sewers, and manholes is persistent in South Asian countries. It is iniquitous caste based work that persist for only the Dalit communities. In India the practice of manual scavenging is banned under the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 but persistently practice, according to SKA, there are more than 1.8 Manual Scavengers in the country with government estimates 54,130 manual scavengers in 2019.<sup>13</sup> The act calls for provision of rehabilitation of manual scavengers with alternative employment opportunities however the government failed to implement the law.

In Bangladesh, dalits who are involved in manual scavenging and other kinds of cleaning work, stay in segregated colonies, slums with unhygienic living conditions. In Nepal, it is prohibited under The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Rules 2013 still, more than 700 thousand people are engaged in this degrading occupation.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Manual Scavenging is also witnessed in Pakistan. Such occupations stigmatize ostracizes Dalits socially also economically with imposing restrictions on social mobility.



## A Newspaper report on Street Cleaners in Dhaka during COVID-19



*Garments workers shout slogans as they block a road demanding their due wages during the lockdown amid concerns over the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in Dhaka, Bangladesh, April 15, 2020.*

*Photo: Reuters/Mohammad Ponir Hossain*

**D**haka's street cleaners have long grappled with challenging working conditions, even pre-pandemic. Hazards on the job include illness due to exposure to harmful waste and injuries sustained while collecting waste (especially from sharp or pointed objects). Often, cleaners have to pick waste with their bare hands. They usually have no boots. But while people highlight the vulnerability of doctors and police officers, the plight of street-cleaners is invisible.

Street cleaners often suffer from various illnesses ranging from back-pain to skin disease

<sup>11</sup> Bangladesh Report: Covid-19 Pandemic: Global Status of DWD Communities. Nagorik Uddyog & BDERM.

<sup>12</sup> *Human Rights Situation of Dalit Community in Nepal*. Dalit Civil Society Organizations & IDSN, <https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Nepal-UPR-2015-Dalit-Cohalition-and-IDSN-report.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Down to earth <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/as-told-to-parliament-july-24-2019-survey-reveals-54-130-manual-scavengers-in-18-states-65810>.

<sup>14</sup> Raman Paudel. Nepal sanitation workers fight COVID-19 unarmed. Down to Earth, 11th May, 2020, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/nepal-sanitation-workers-fight-covid-19-unarmed-71033>

to gastric issues, owing to their regular exposure to waste materials in jobs such as sweeping streets, cleaning toilets, emptying septic tanks and manual scavenging, according to Nagorik Uddyog, a rights-based non-profit organisation in Bangladesh.

Many of the street-cleaners live in areas like Nazira Bajar, Wari and Dholpur, all congested spaces with houses just 10 to 12 feet in length and shared with family members, according to Nagorik Uddyog. Due to population density, physical distancing is not possible for people in these areas.

Between 1 and 1.5 million of Bangladesh's street-cleaners are Dalit. The fear of being stigmatised is so strong that many (particularly from the Hindu community) prefer to refer to themselves as 'Harijan' or 'Child of God' a term popularised by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi – though in India, many members of the community today feel this term is patronising and identify as 'Dalit' instead. Although caste is traditionally associated with Hinduism, in Bangladesh these practises have also been adopted by a small proportion of the Muslim community. Without the cleaners, the city will cease to function and become choked with waste; yet their profession hardly inspires societal respect.

As Nagorik Uddyog points out, many of the street-cleaners are vulnerable because they are often employed contractually. Due to the ongoing crisis, many contract workers have lost their jobs, as have street-cleaners working for private entities. Those who do retain their jobs (such as the more than 10,000 cleaners who work at both city corporations) find the pay inadequate.

(Source: <https://thewire.in/south-asia/bangladesh-caste-discrimination-dalits-covid-19>)

Plantation sector in Sri Lanka also share similar forms of normalization like in other countries. This sector is characterized by feminization of labour with employing most Dalit women who confront to degrading working conditions. The labour force participation rate in this sector is 52.9% , almost 80% of workers in the plantation sector are women working in tea and rubber plantations as a daily paid workers.<sup>15</sup> Plantation workers are continued to be subjected to various kinds of oppression concerning their civil, political and economic rights particularly women.

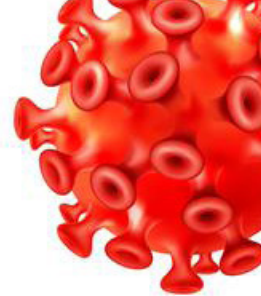
Historically, the girl-children and women on the plantations were assigned plucking work of tea for their livelihood. A few would be employed in the bungalows of senior estate man-

agement executive or staff as domestic servants. Though women have access to employment opportunities and incomes but the nature of work is precarious as they are employed mainly in semi-skilled labor-intensive industries irrespective of their educational level, with no opportunities for upgrading skills. The nature of work is characterised by long working hours, exposure to occupational health hazards, vulnerability to job insecurity, inequitable gender division of labor, and subordination in the labor market.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The Sri Lankan Women – Partner in Progress. Department of Census and Statistics & Ministry of Women's Affairs Sri Lanka, 2014

<sup>16</sup> Women in the Plantations of Sri Lanka: Their Access to Economic Rights Land, Higher Education and Employable Skills for Livelihood. Human Development Organisation, 2017





# IMPACT ON LIVELIHOOD OF DALITS DURING COVID- 19

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Given the insecurity of livelihood, employment and lack of adequate social security rendered them into helpless situations and at the mercy of government.

**C**COVID-19 and lockdown has severely impacted the livelihoods of substantial sections of the population across the world, leaving many unemployed overnight and forcing them into a state of multidimensional vulnerability with no or minimal protection at disposal. The economic crisis has not only further compounded their marginalization but also aggravated their involuntary deprivations arising out of hierarchical system based on caste. The economic pain caused by the lockdown has hit socially and historically marginalized communities like ex-untouchables (Dalits). These groups as a result of discriminatory embedded in the caste system were already disproportionately poor compared to other social groups. The COVID-19 exposed them to immediate risk of hunger and starvation and loss of dignity and powerlessness. Given the insecurity of livelihood, employment and lack of adequate social security rendered them into helpless situations and at the mercy of government. Studies have highlighted that owing to lower levels of educational attainments, the job loss was higher among them. Further reverse migration due to closure of economic activities resulted into

additional debts by marginalized families and drop out of children from the schools. In this process the women get affected more than men as they confronted to multiple forms of discrimination being at the intersection of caste, class and gender. The following sections discuss the wide range of impact of COVID-19 on Dalits.

## Impact on socio-economic development

The slowed economic activities have increasingly resulted in shrinking revenue of government thereby resulting in cuts on social expenditures such as education, health and other social insurance schemes that are crucial for human development of the population in general and more particularly marginalized groups. In India, the sudden change in priority expenditure has put heavy curtailment on expenditure on important heads like education and other social protection facilities provided to vulnerable sections of the society. It estimated that children from socially disadvantaged groups are most likely to be forced into stunting and extreme levels of mal-

nourishment.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that education is instrumental in securing decent job/work and any curtailment of expenditure on education could result in compromising capability formation of marginalized groups who are the greatest beneficiary of social welfare provided by the state.

Caste continues to be one of the determining factors in public provisioning of services even during difficult times like COVID-19 lockdown. The instances of separate quarantine facilities for historically marginalized communities and dominant communities were reported in Nepal

while in India Dalits were prevented from using the crematorium. In some of the incidents, COVID-19 positive tested patients who were admitted into quarantine facilities declined to eat food cooked by Dalit women.<sup>18</sup>

## Impact on the employment and wages

The COVID-19 has severely affected the economic activities, particularly employment in developing economies is the worst hit and has pushed millions into poverty. According to the World Bank estimates the global extreme pov-

## A story of Manual Scavenger and waste pickers from Nepal



**N**abin Magar (25) a sanitation worker in Kathmandu valley said that the work was a compulsion. “I don’t like this work and don’t want to do it during the COVID-19 pandemic. But I have no other option,” he said. Nabin wakes up at 4 am and sets out for work. He spends the whole day in search of garbage; but is afraid of it due to lack of proper surgical mask, gloves and shoes.

A waste management group that works with the Nepal government claimed it provided hundreds of mask and gloves to the employees. More than one thousand sanitation workers set out on their duty in over 250 trucks every day. Among them, more than 700 employees are deployed by the Kathmandu municipality and 1,000 from private organisations. Dozens of companies and organisations including the municipality did not provide protective gear saying they had ‘only limited masks and gloves’.

(Source: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/nepal-sanitation-workers-fight-covid-19-unarmed-71033>)

## ON DALITS IN SOUTH ASIA

erty rate would increase from 8.23% in 2019 to 9.18 marking the first increase in poverty rates since 1998. It would add 176 million additional poor to already existing one who survive on marginal incomes. Notably the large share of the new extreme poor will largely be concentrated in the countries that are already grappling with beating the poverty numbers.<sup>19</sup>

Out of this half the number of poor is most likely to be concentrated in South Asian countries like India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan etc. In India the study by Deshpande found that the rate of job loss was three times higher among the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) in India compared to upper castes (dominant caste) who are relatively employed in the formal sector.<sup>20</sup> Specifically rural Dalits seemed to have affected most. Since upper castes have better access to education, they are overrepresented in secure jobs and remain less vulnerable to economic shocks. This can be noticed in societies characterized with higher levels of social and economic inequalities and often aggravate pre-existing structural inequalities based on caste identity.

Most of the Dalits are landless in Nepal and millions rely on daily wages from the informal sectors, ultimately having no income and facing a dreadful crisis amid the lockdown.<sup>21</sup> In a sur-

Most of the Dalits are landless in Nepal and millions rely on daily wages from the informal sectors, ultimately having **no income and facing a dreadful crisis** amid the lockdown.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Saini Manvir. HARYANA: 49% of dalit kids are malnourished: Report. The Economic Times, 29th July, 2015, <https://health.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/industry/haryana-49-of-dalit-kids-are-malnourished-report/48260967>

<sup>18</sup> Jha Prashant. "Quarantined youth, 23, refuses to eat food eat food cooked by Dalit woman in Nainital, booked". The Times of India, May 20, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/quarantined-youth-23-refuses-to-eat-food-cooked-by-dalit-woman-in-nainital-booked/articleshow/75834636.cms>

<sup>19</sup> Projected poverty impacts of COVID-19 (coronavirus). The World Bank, 8th June, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/projected-poverty-impacts-of-COVID-19>

<sup>20</sup> Ashwini Deshpande. The Covid-19 Pandemic and Lockdown: First Effects on Gender Gaps in Employment and Domestic Work in India. No 30, Working Papers, Ashoka University, Department of Economics, June, 2020

<sup>21</sup> Dalits in Nepal amid lockdown. KIOS Foundation, 24th June, 2020, <https://www.kios.fi/en/2020/06/dalits-in-nepal-amid-lockdown/>



The COVID-19 and lockdown has resulted in similar trends where women are hit hard and confronted with existential question to earn their livelihood.

vey done by DNF, the situation the respondents were asked whether they have regular work and or wage-based work. A very large majority with 77% said that they have no work and upon seeing the situation across the provinces it is highest with 81% in province 1 and lowest with 70% in Sudurpaschim and in other provinces it is within 80% which is very high indeed. The assessment further asked whether they are partially engaged and 10% of them said they are. Those who said they are partially engaged are lowest with 5% in province 1 and highest with 13% in Sudurpaschim.

According to study conducted by Nagorik Uddyog, “The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the livelihood-food, water, shelter, jobs, wages, and health needs of the CDWD. As mentioned in the previous section, most people of the CDWD are day labourers who worked at different non-government and private organisations. They had become jobless when the government declared general holidays (instead of formal lockdown) for approximately two months during 26th March to 30th May. All the institutions except emergency service providing institutions remained closed during this period. The unemployed caused as a result of COVID also lead to other serious issues relating to food, health.”<sup>22</sup>

Nagorik Uddyog also pointed out, many of the street-cleaners are vulnerable because they are often employed contractually. Due to the ongoing crisis, many contract workers have lost their jobs, as have street-cleaners working for private entities. Those who do retain their jobs such as the more than 10,000 cleaners who work





for both, government and private entities, find the pay inadequate.<sup>23</sup>

In India, an online survey was done by NCDHR on collecting data on access to services. In this survey, they found that under MGNREGS, employment guarantee scheme, only 52 percent of the rural Dalits were able to access jobs, in which only 32 percent has been able to receive the enhanced wages according to the COVID19 relief measures.

## Specific Impact on Women including the livelihood

Women's access to economic resources and livelihood opportunities can lead to their empowerment. Women's economic empowerment can enable them to have control on their way of life and live dignified life in society. It is also about creating just and equal society. But the reality is that women often face various kind of discrimination and gender based violence, with particular section of women experience multiple forms of discrimination because of factors such as ethnicity and caste as asserted OECD 2012.<sup>24</sup> Considering the preexisting vulnerability of Dalit women, it can be argued that they have experienced high degree of discrimination during COVID 19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 and lockdown has resulted in similar trends where women are hit hard and confronted with existential question to earn their livelihood. A research report by Citi<sup>25</sup> estimates around 220 million women working in different sectors are potentially exposed to vulnerability due to risk of losing jobs and pay cuts, globally. Out of total 44 million workers engaged in vulnerable sectors, one third of women i.e. 31

million faced and could face job cuts compared to men. The livelihood of women in stigmatized professions such as sex work is hit hard due to lockdown leading to return migration of their home states due to loss of livelihood. According to estimates of All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW) over 60% of the sex workers have left to their home states due to sudden loss of income and avoid starvation.<sup>26</sup> Although women have suffered more, the traditional gender roles and stigmatized jobs remain their preserve. The frontline health workers (ASHA) in India and cleaning workers or manual scavengers are exclusively Dalit in most of the south Asian countries.

Increase in economic distress during this lockdown has also resulted in scaling up of domestic issues within Dalit families. AIDMAM witnessed incidents where there were already strained relationship between husband and wife which further aggravated during this 3 months lock down as Dalit women are unable to access the shelter home or alternative safe space during lockdown as well as unaware of legal measures including domestic violence helpline number, etc.

AIDMAM also identified that during the Pandemic, Caste and Gender based Violence are being committed against Dalit women. Similar reality is observed in Nepal where Dalit women

<sup>22</sup> Bangladesh Report: Covid-19 Pandemic: Global Status of DWD Communities. Nagorik Uddyog & BDERM

<sup>23</sup> Shah Ashrafi. How COVID-19 Compounded Caste Discrimination in Bangladesh. The WIRE, 11th September, 2020

<sup>24</sup> Report on Women's economic empowerment, Poverty reduction and Pro-Poor Growth, the OECD DAC Network on Gender Equality. Organization for Economic Corporation and Development (OCED), 2012

<sup>25</sup> Pipa Stevens. Women are disproportionately impacted by coronavirus job losses. 29th May, 2020

<sup>26</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/how-indias-sex-workers-are-keeping-a-float-during-the-pandemic/articleshow/78251320.cms>

## Hathras Gang-rape and Murder, that shook India's caste consciousness

A 19-year-old Dalit woman was working in the field along with her mother and brother barely 200 meters away from their home. During the broad daylight, she was abducted by upper (Thakur) caste men and dragged into the field to be gang-raped. She was strangulated, her spine broken, and tongue cut. Her mother found her naked in a death-like condition with blood on her vagina and around her eyes.

She was not provided the best medical facilities for 14 days and thus upon the day of arrival in a premier medical facility, she passed away. Moreover, the district administration and police forcefully conducted her funeral without the consent of the family or kins. The mother and family members begged to give back the body of the victim, but the administration and police used force; and home sealed the family and relatives, thus snatching the rights of the family to conduct her last rites in a dignified way. This despicable act was followed by completely shutting down the village for the Valmiki (Dalit) community and no media, people's representatives were allowed to enter the village for days.

*GFOD Appeal for Justice for CDWD women against violence*

experienced domestic violence with increased caste based violence.<sup>27</sup> The already existing pay gap between men and women intensifies with unexpected income shocks and poses multiple risks for women to survive. In Nepal a study by FEDO finds that women from Dalit community are worst affected in the event of loss of income and endangered their food security. Due to Covid-19 lockdown and subsequent job loss made significant Dalit population in Nepal dependent on state assistance. But the ingrained caste biases resulted in discrimination in providing relief and food to the affected population.<sup>28</sup>

## Impact on human rights and labour rights

The old saying states Disasters doesn't discriminate, but the disaster management and mitigation discriminates the most vulnerable further. These discriminations have various faces- social, economic, political, civic and legal aspects. The social prejudice against the CDWD forces to stamp them as the vectors of COVID-19 without evidences to prove and thus stigmatizes the entire community as socially excluded groups.

The social distancing has negative connotations when it comes to the communities discriminated based on work and descent. CDWD have

been historically discriminated against for centuries hence the distancing does not just remain physical distancing but deepens the historical notional social distancing in the minds of the dominant social groups. This notional social distancing has its roots in the hierarchical society whereby the social groups at lower strata of the society such as CDWD are labelled impure, filthy and cannot claim civil and political, economic, social and cultural rights.

The majority of informal sector workers including daily wage laborers, manual scavengers and migrant labour hail from CDWD. Basic preventive measures such as sanitizers and hand-wash are not available to the habitation. There is little to no access to healthcare services. Sharing congested spaces, living in slums and ghettos with severely restricted means of sanitation and hygiene, no safety net is sadly an everyday reality – regardless of a pandemic. However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic the situation for CDWD is getting worse and life-threatening. But, of course, now in COVID-19 it is getting worse, and life-threatening as home quarantine during Covid-19 is almost an impractical measure for them.

In situations of uncertainties and instability, the institution of state tends to act in authoritarian manner by taking the excessive control of individual's life and governing their behavior for supposedly larger public cause. The inalienable and fundamental liberties guaranteed and protected in the constitution framework of respective countries are viewed as secondary to larger public interest. Covid-19 pandemic has empowered states all around the world immensely in regulating and governing the citizens' life at their dictates. This was clearly evident the way in which the governments used force to mitigate the movement of people during the lockdown. The migrants who were forced to return back to native places were treated as a secondary citizens and showed insensitivity of state towards their unwanted apathy. The dignity of human

being was tarnished terribly and exposed the structural fault lines in ensuring human rights that are integral to labour rights.

Instead of effectively enforcing human rights, the government seems busy creating anti-human and labour rights situations as a way of recovery and induces investment. Leveraging on the vulnerability of already displaced workers, India allowed dilution of many of its crucial labour laws that provided security to workers. Some state governments like Uttar Pradesh cancelled it for three year period while some state increased length of working day to 12 hours. This contrasts the international conventions of Decent Work by ILO and deprives workers from their fundamental rights at workplace. In countries like Bangladesh, the working hours are already exploitative in nature and compromise on work space safety standards especially in garment industry. In this process, women suffer in many ways, first due to endemic gender discrimination at work place in wage payment and sexual abuse and secondly because they are first workers to be laid off in times of emergency closure of factories.

The widespread impact of COVID19 is still unknown to us, but it is safe to say that it has reversed few years of progress of SDGs in many countries. When talking of CDWD, it further takes back a generation of development as the focus of inclusion will be further shifted in the COVID19 Mitigation Measures (CMM). Thus, the motto of 'Leave No One Behind' will have serious implications when the countries will focus towards rebuilding their economic, political and fiscal systems. This would result in CDWD facing serious impact due to their social-political-economic position, which is of left behind.

<sup>27</sup> "Uncertain Future" *Effect of Corona Pandemic on the lives of Dalits of Nepal :A Rapid Assessment Survey Report*. "Dalit CSOs National Campaign against Corona Pandemic" & Dalit NGO Federation (DNF), Nepal. Chakupat Nepal, June 2020

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



Human capacities and wellbeing of the CDWD have seriously impacted with many of them are forced into absolute poverty, with loss of jobs, lack of opportunities, social stigmas, no access to services and social exclusion. Further, the access to public education is been affected, and promotion of online education would have a significant impact of children and youth from CDWD due to lack of access or availability of technological resources.

The two main concerns of this era on CDWD are gender dimension and access to justice. The women from CDWD have faced a further marginalization, with the CMM, women face further discrimination and violence through domestic and social violence. Further the CDWD blamed as vectors of COVID19, are facing atrocities and violence from the other communities.

According to Indian Express, 27th May 2020<sup>29</sup> India's 40 lakh waste pickers in the informal sector and garbage collectors employed by states are at a direct risk of getting infected with coro-

navirus as they deal medical and contaminated waste, cleaning residential colonies, hospitals, and commercial establishments, and most of them work without safety gear and PPE, without having social security in addition to this they face a rampant discrimination. According to WHO guidelines, sanitation workers should be equipped with a mask, long-sleeved gown, heavy-duty gloves, eye goggles or a face shield, closed work shoes, but the ground realities is quite opposite.

## Caste Violence in Midst of Pandemic

The pandemic has exposed the caste consciousness of the communities especially in South Asia. During the lockdowns and COVID-19 restriction period there has been various forms of violence and atrocities were conducted aiming at the Dalit community. The atrocities against Dalits at this time was either atrocities done due to the COVID-19 or atrocities committed





during COVID-19.

The atrocities done due to COVID-19 is seen in most of the states in the South Asia, as Dalits, most vulnerable in the community were blamed as the vectors of the disease within the society, This was often targeted at the first responders or health care workers, however, Dalits being the primary source of unclean and indecent work, were targeted as the spreaders of the virus in the respective societies. Manual Scavengers and health care workers were specifically targeted because of the nature of their work.

The atrocities done during pandemic, is the continuation of the discrimination and violence embark upon the Dalits in South Asia. The lockdown and restrictions in social interactions has not decreased the caste based violence towards Dalits in South Asia. In India, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), which has intervened in more than 80 such cases, stressed the need to draw the attention of the enforcement authorities and the judiciary on

discrimination and atrocities against Dalits especially women and children. “Dalits have been discriminated against through social boycott and physical assault. Untouchability and physical abuse are rampant during the pandemic. It is important to highlight that Dalit lives matter in the country,” said Dalit rights activist Paul Divakar.<sup>30</sup>

The nature of these cases reveal a surge in cases of layered untouchability through socio-economic boycott and physical assault, murder of Dalit men, women and a minor, several cases of brutal attacks, rape and murder of a minor, sexual assault, desecration of Ambedkar Statue, domestic violence, and a case of 3 Dalit women being branded witches, heads tonsured and made to consume human waste. Though, the Consti-

<sup>29</sup> Chakravorty Abhimanyu. Fighting from the bottom, India's sanitation workers are also frontline workers battling Covid. The Indian Express, May 27th, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-sanitation-workers-waste-pickers-coronavirus-pandemic-6414446/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2020/jul/07/atrocities-against-dalits-see-a-rise-2166477.html>

Though, the Constitution of India prohibits discrimination in any form, the in-differential attitude of the society towards Dalit's and Adivasis and refusal on its part to change its mindset has been leveraged also due to impunity within the system. These are one of the primary reasons for the exploitation of the marginalised communities.



tution of India prohibits discrimination in any form, the in-differential attitude of the society towards Dalits and Adivasis and refusal on its part to change its mindset has been leveraged also due to impunity within the system. These are one of the primary reasons for the exploitation of the marginalised communities.<sup>31</sup>

In Nepal, three young men including two Dalit youth were killed in the Karnali province and a 15-year-old Dalit girl was murdered in Rupan-dehi district in Nepal. According to the reports, incident occurred when Navaraj BK, who was in love with Sushma Malla (upper caste girl) of Soti, reached her village of along with his friends for asked her to marry him. Upon knowing that Sushma would elope with Navraj, her family gathered their neighbours to attack Navaraj and friends. The violent mob started beating the young boys and threw them into the Beri River. It was learned that Sushma's family was against her marrying a lower caste man.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, in Badgi Gumbiki, Devdaha municipality 11, Rupandehi district, 15-year-old Angira Pasi was murdered due to her affair with an upper caste boy Bipendra. Both of them had eloped on 22 May and when some people found them, both were sent to Bipendra's home. Unfortunately, Angira was found dead during the day time the same day at home of Birendra. Her clothes were torn and had scratches on the body.<sup>33</sup>

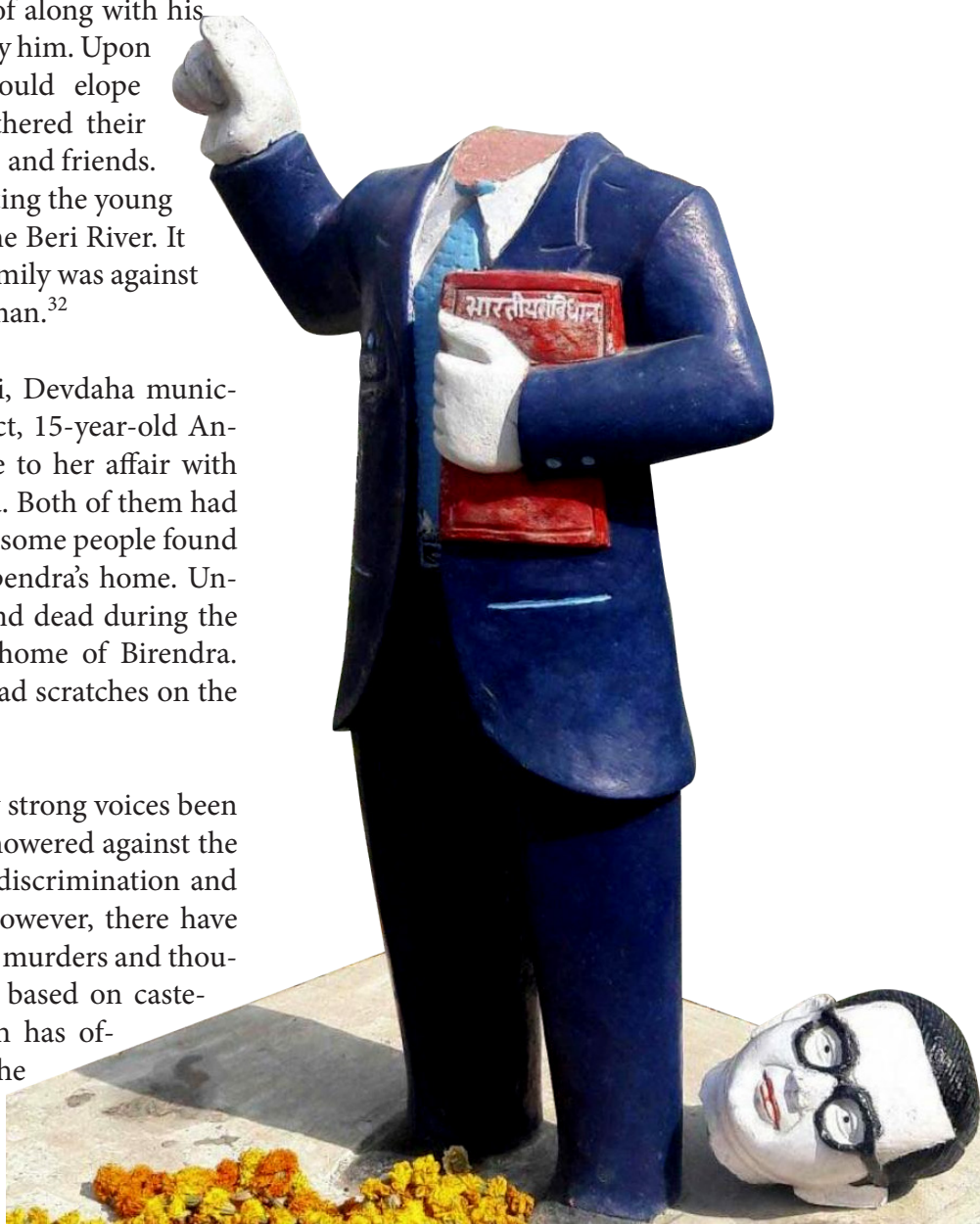
The era of the pandemic saw strong voices been raised and solidarity been showered against the atrocities against the racial discrimination and murder of George Floyd. However, there have been more than hundreds of murders and thousands of atrocities reported based on caste-based discrimination, which has often felt on deaf ears. Even the much talked about case of Hathras was made inconsequential after

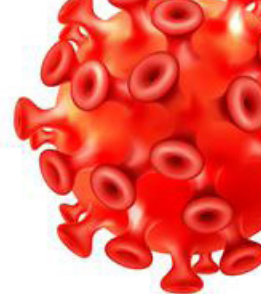
a couple of weeks. Thus, there is strong resistance to highlighting the atrocities on Dalits in the macro-level discussions. While in the micro-level, the police, the dominant caste families, the culprit, or the society creates hurdles in accessing any forms of justice for the Dalit victims of atrocities.

<sup>31</sup> <https://idsn.org/surge-in-atrocities-against-dalits-and-adviasis-under-covid-19-lockdown-in-india-reported/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/murder-case-sparks-a-reckoning-with-nepals-caste-discrimination/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/01/nepal-ensure-justice-caste-based-killings#>





# INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES ON COVID19

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Given the insecurity of livelihood, employment and lack of adequate social security rendered them into helpless situations and at the mercy of government.

**T**he unprecedented pandemic of COVID-19 has brought to our notice the importance of creating socially and economically equitable societies and revisit the dominant neoliberal policies that have strongly resulted in producing grotesque socio-economic inequalities across the world. In the wake of such conditions, the institutional responses to catastrophic crises like COVID-19 appeared to have made little impact on the lives of vulnerable populations in general. The initial phase of response was largely characterized by civil society organisations and mitigating the sudden risks confronted by marginalized populations. The judiciary has also seemed to have taken cognizance of the crisis and sought a pro-active role from the government in minimizing the pain ensued by COVID-19 lockdown. But the approach of these institutions has largely been curative rather than preventive and do not adequately take into account the conditions of already socially and economically marginalized communities like Dalits. The deeply entrenched hierarchies continue to be reproduced in relief management and subsequent rehabilitation due to structural biases and prejudices endemic in

the institutions engaged in relief work.

## Responses from the government machineries

The governments responses in respect to the Dalit communities has been reactionary than preventive. Governments have taken several initiatives and adopted several mechanisms to systematize relief distribution. These included establishing funds at each tier of government to fight against the coronavirus, setting up grain banks, establish a selection procedure for identifying needy families, distributing relief packages using a “one-door policy”, maintaining the privacy of COVID-19 suspected and infected people and drafting legal provisions to serve affected people. Established a fund to fight against the coronavirus COVID-19 fund at federal level the federal government has set up a COVID-19 fund to muster and distribute relief to needy families. The fund is expected to help to combat the spread of the corona virus and manage the unfavorable environment resulting from the pandemic.

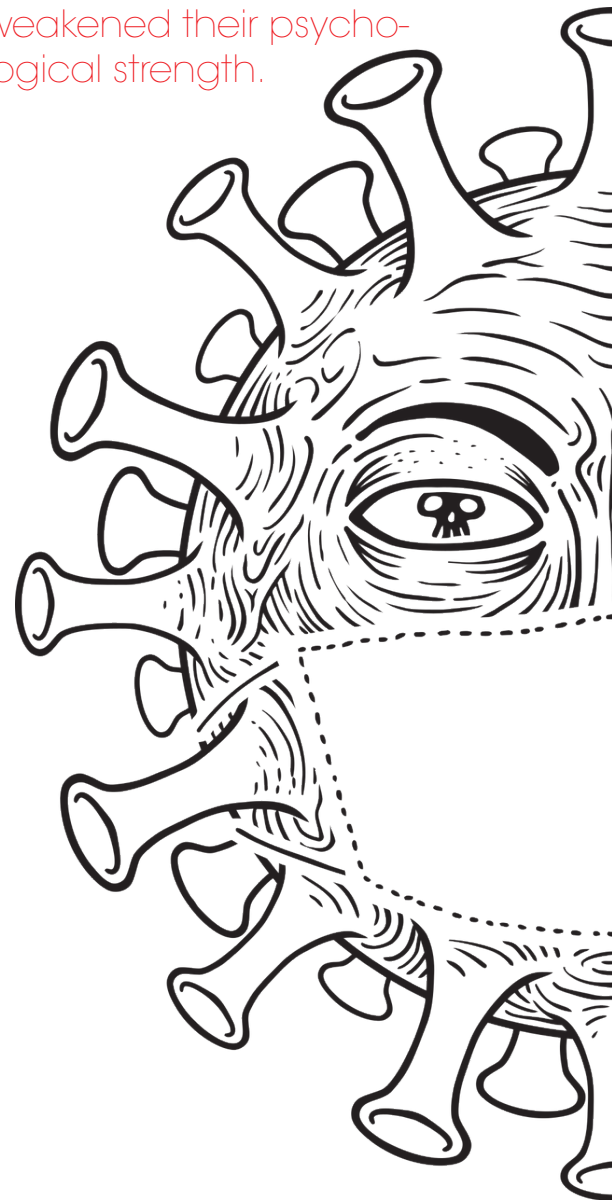


## Bangladesh

Bangladesh, despite the possibility of widespread infection as a densely populated country, the government didn't go for formal lockdown instead declared general holidays starting from 26 March, 2020. The general holidays continued till 30 May, 2020. During this period all the government, non-government organisations and public transport remain closed except few emergency services providing organisations, grocery stores and medicine shops. But the owner of the garment suddenly decided to re-open factories, and as a result, the garments workers rushed to the city to join the factories. Since there were no public transports, many of them had to walk a long distance to reach the workplace. Immediately after that, the decision was changed once again due to public demand and workers went back to the village, in between there were vacations of Eid festival. Even after repeated warnings from the government side, not to move, a large number of people left Dhaka to meet the family in the village, mainly people who work in the informal sector.

However, community, as mentioned before the lowest income group suffered a lot due to the general holidays declared by the government. The cleaners of urban areas especially working in different government, non-government and private institutions like shopping malls, super shops and supermarkets. Almost all of them had become jobless during the two months of general holidays when movement at public places was restricted. This joblessness situation has brought immense misery to the people of the CDWD. Staying at home for a long time increased their mental stress, which sometimes led to domestic violence. The uncertainty of getting a job again has weakened their psychological strength. Lack of food support has also weakened them physi-

This joblessness situation has brought immense misery to the people of the CDWD. Staying at home for a long time increased their mental stress, which sometimes led to domestic violence. **The uncertainty of getting a job again has weakened their psychological strength.**







cally, which also intensifies their vulnerability of getting affected by COVID-19 in the long run.

The Bangladesh government started providing financial support to the CDWD under the social safety net programme from 2013. But the programme widened its coverage in 2017 and included people from all disadvantaged communities. As a result, the supports which were entirely dedicated for the CDWD were divided into many communities which ultimately reduced the coverage among CDWD. Though the government has been increasing the budget every year under this program, the coverage among CDWD has yet to be improved. It is assumed that on an average 20% of deserving CDWD all over Bangladesh is currently getting support under the social safety net programme, which is still ongoing during the pandemic situation.

Psychological security is a big concern for people from all strata, let alone the CDWD. Many CDWD in Bangladesh, especially the day labourers lost their jobs and have been suffering from anxiety and uncertainty. The Bangladesh government has been trying to recover the economic damage by prioritising people's lives in the next year's budget, which has increased a little for the health and social security of people. This increase is not enough as expected; the civil society and the economist primarily show discontent on the government decisions, not realising the impact of the COVID-19 fully.

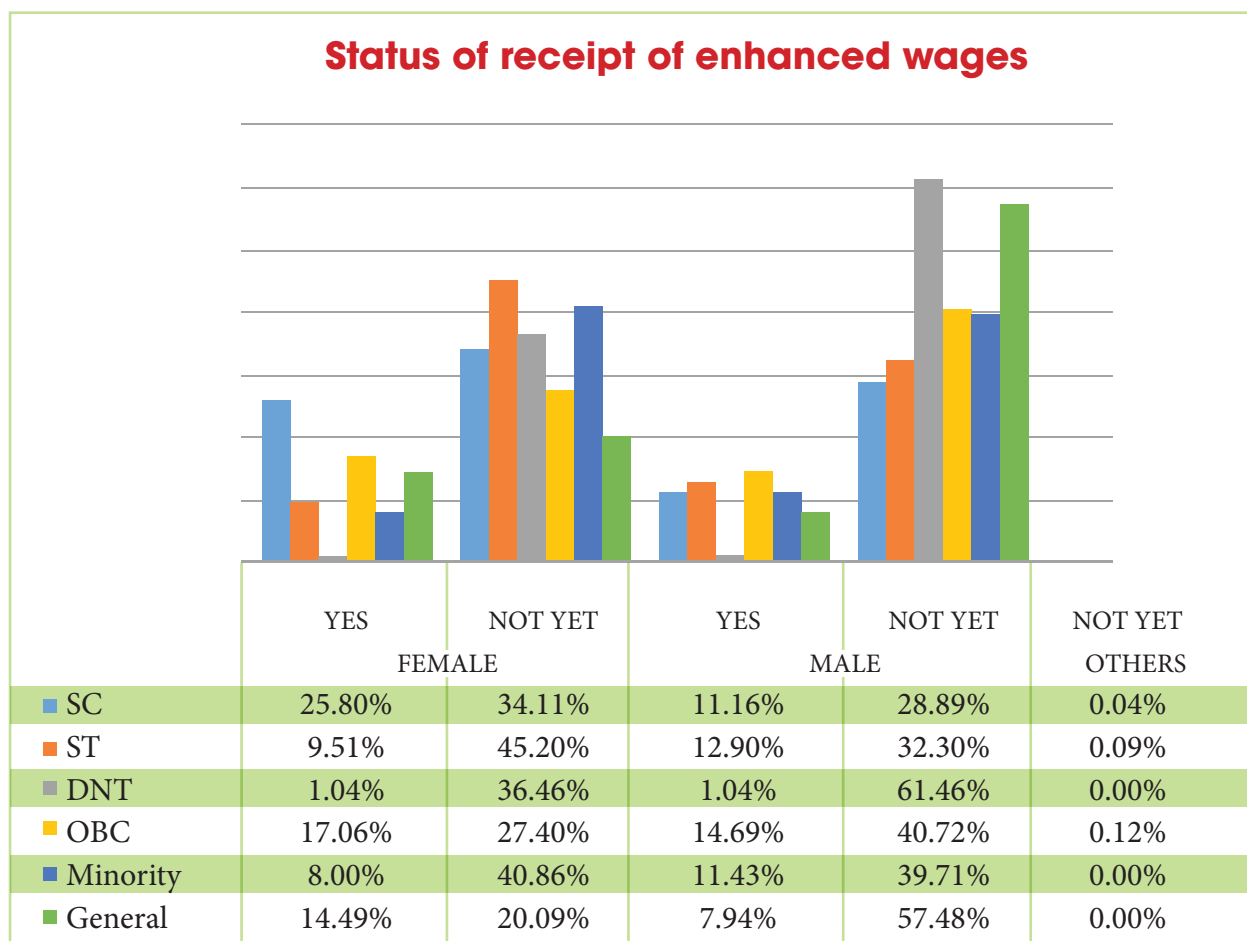


India has a system of social protection floor to ensure basic income assistance and critical public services to the marginalised. The Ayushman Bharat Yojana, launched in 2018, is a national health insurance scheme to provide secondary

care facilities and hospitalization to vulnerable families. The Scheme offers Rs. 5 lakh health insurance cover to each family, annually. The purpose of the scheme is to reduce financial burden on the poor and vulnerable and meet the Sustainable Development Goal 3 on 'Health and Wellbeing' by leaving no one behind. The NCDHR national factsheet reported the presence of significant vulnerable population of Dalit during the pandemic and a large number of them denied visits by healthcare workers to check-on symptoms.<sup>34</sup>

One of the most affected areas for Dalit communities, is the job and employment. While the policies have been executed by the state towards ensuring the communities doesn't get affected because of the COVID19 Mitigation measures, being the most vulnerable communities, these communities have not able to access the services.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provides for 100 days of guaranteed wage employment to rural poor households annually. Under the



In India, government has provided various programmes for the welfare of the Dalit communities. These programmes were implemented based on the previous policies. However, these policies have limited access to SC communities.

COVID-19 Relief Package, MGNREGS wages were enhanced by Rs. 20 from April 1, 2020, to

<sup>34</sup> DELAYED AND DENIED: INJUSTICE IN COVID-19 RELIEF National Factsheet. Delhi: NCDHR [http://www.ncdhr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/3-NCDHR-State-TN-weclaim\\_April-May-2020.pdf](http://www.ncdhr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/3-NCDHR-State-TN-weclaim_April-May-2020.pdf) 49

Rs. 202 per day. Besides, pending wages of Rs. 6,000 crores as of March 2020 had to be paid to the beneficiaries.

The assessment reveals a huge gap in awareness about enhanced wages, frail scheme coverage, and scanty realization by the SC and ST households (Tamil Nadu is an exception). Moreover, a significant presence of vulnerable groups is seen in these households. Low coverage translates into denial of entitlement, especially when it is established by the 2015-16 Agriculture Census that of the predominantly landless SCs those with landholdings, 78% own unproductive marginal landholding. For the STs, marginal landholdings is 56% and smallholding 23.5%. Besides, out migration is higher among these groups, particularly among women, accompanied by child labour (Census 2011). Poor scheme coverage and low realisation of the enhanced wages is therefore more likely to expose them to other social risks without full livelihood restoration and income assistance, including loan waivers.



Both federal and provincial governments have formulated policies to distribute relief to the most vulnerable people during the beginning of the lockdown period. The guideline from the federal government was issued through Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration naming it covid19 affected people and area relief distribution work plan 076. In the guideline a sample criterion was mentioned too. According to that guideline, all the local level governments are supposed to dedicate a contact person at the ward level who will be responsible to collect the names of the vulnerable and affected people along with the complaints if any.

The daily updates of the distributed relief packages were supposed to be uploaded on the websites or made public through other available means. Likewise, the ward was responsible to monitor the distribution of relief packages and report to ministry on the given format. It asked to send the names of labours from the informal sectors. The guidelines issued had asked to prioritize on seven areas of vulnerability; they are elderly people, people with disability, people working in formal sector, HIV positive, those staying in temporary shelters victims of GBV, trafficked women, those working in informal sector of Dalit, women (Badi and Mushahar community).

Likewise, for the safer motherhood priority is to be given to pregnant and delivering woman, children without guardians and living in children home, those working in informal sector marginalized and minority groups, sexual minorities while providing any kind of relief packages. It has also been defined who the helpless are, according to the work plan they are staying in shelter, temples, monasteries, mosque, Gurudwara, church or old aged home.

The province two government has also defined the targeted beneficiary for relief distribution and those who are not in public and administrative job, none in the family receiving salaries from employment, business, and not having regular source of income other than daily wage labour, not receiving pension from any other sources.

The federal government has defined what the relief package should contain. A standard relief package needs to contain 30kg of rice, 3kg lentil, two packets of salt (2kg), edible oil two liter soap 4, and sugar 2kg. However, different provinces have adopted this policy in their own ways and

tried to have packages based on the number of family members (four members of family and or more than four).

The lockdown has stopped the mobility of the people and they have been asked to confined within their homes. Though the lockdown is severe in towns and cities it not to some extent relaxed in villages, especially in the hill area as the houses are quite apart from each other and population is also thin. While interviewing the key informants in province one and Sudurpaschim they stated that in the villages people are enjoying the lockdown as many of the family members have come home and talking to each other including with the neighbors. Those who were seasonal workers including migrant workers are said to be the worst hit. In order to know the situation, the respondents were asked whether they have regular work and or wage-based work. A very large majority with 77% said that they have no work and upon seeing the situation across the provinces it is highest with 81% in province 1 and lowest with 70% in Sudurpaschim and in other provinces it is within 80% which is very high indeed. The assessment further asked whether they are partially engaged and 10% of them said they are. Those who said they are partially engaged are lowest with 5% in province 1 and highest with 13% in Sudurpaschim.



The federal and provincial government had announced to provide a limited financial and food support to the affected population but that support in the form of ration and cash grants could not reach to those who needed it most. Even the federal government failed to transfer the money to the provinces for support to those who were most vulnerable.<sup>35</sup> The DWD commu-

nities due to their marginalized position in the society faced hardships in accessing very basic and normal services. The DWD communities faced difficulties in access to the government services and the government system is not efficient enough to reach the entire population. The localities where DWD communities live are already devoid of basic services like water supply, sanitation, education and health and the situation during COVID-19 lockdown became even worse where such services remained suspended in other areas as well.

As majority of DWD communities people work as labourers, do manual works or earn a livelihood on a daily-wage basis, many were left unemployed due to the lockdown. Majority of industries had asked their workers not to come on work due to the lockdown, so the workers remained jobless during that period. Without an income, these jobless workers suffered financial losses as well food insecurity.

The departments, which were providing emergency and municipal services were opened to some extent but they were offering only limited services. They had asked workers to come on alternative days and they also laid off many daily staff. Even though some NGOs and government organisations were providing food rations, but they could not serve the entire population. In cities those who are living in rented houses were unable to pay rents to their landlords, which created disputes among them and landlords. In two provinces, Sindh and Punjab the government had issued orders to landlords not to evict their tenants during lockdown.

<sup>35</sup> The Dawn, Rs. 4.84bn Covid fund still unutilised, NA told, 27 October 2020, available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1587244/>



## ON DALITS IN SOUTH ASIA

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Although the federal and provincial government had announced various steps to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on general population, those measures remained non-implementable due to corruption and non-efficiency in the government department.

DWD communities suffered a lot due to these faulty measures. The government had strictly ordered to maintain social distancing measures and to wear of masks at public places, but those orders were not being obeyed in majority of areas. Even in the crowded places like markets and religious places like mosques, people were not observing social distancing and seldom wore face masks. Many people were not observing SOPs because they believed in non-existence of the disease. Those who wearing were because of the SOPs and in fear of police.

Children without guardians and living in children home, those working in informal sector marginalized and minority groups, sexual minorities while providing any kind of relief packages.



Due to government measures like lockdowns, smart lockdowns in the most-affected areas and issuance of separate SOPs for each sector, the cases of coronavirus started declining in June, but in October the positive cases began to increase again, which the government termed as the second wave. This time the severity of the disease was observed but the government refused to impose another lockdown. Even schools remained opened. The smart lockdowns, however, continued in selected areas.<sup>36</sup>

DWD communities especially those belonging to religious minorities continued to suffer as violence against Dalits could not be stopped even in the lockdown. Discrimination was meted out with the people of minority communities in distribution of food rations in major cities. Even some NGOs who were distributing food rations in poor localities of cities refused to provide ration to Dalit Hindus on religious grounds. One case was reported in Karachi in which a charitable organisation refused to give food ration packs to Hindus on religion basis.<sup>37</sup>



## Sri Lanka

Security and health sectors were actively engaged in Covid 19 preventive and people protection activities. Media, in coordination with the Department of Health, conducted health safety awareness programmes. CSOs as well conducted awareness-raising activities. Local NGOs and INGOs provided relief goods, food packets etc for the isolated families in the rural and plantation areas. Organizations like HDO Sri Lanka provided PPE items, food items and home garden facilities to the plantation community and the health authorities. The Government grant of Rs.5,000.00 was limited to Samurdhi (Poverty Elimination Scheme) recipient families. Only a few of the

Most of those of plantation youths, working in main cities such as Colombo and who returned to estates during the Covid 19 period, or those who reside and work outside (male and/or female youth) did not receive the grants due to the absence of identification or personal registration information of them.





plantation workers are Samurdhi beneficiaries. Due to various reasons, this scheme does not reach most of the deserving plantation workers, according to media personnel and politicians. It is apparent; therefore, that support schemes do not fully reach the community concerned.

At the same time, the government grant of Rs.5,000 was made available to families below the poverty line, namely: non Samurdhi benefit recipients, those not receiving Old age subsidy, Physically Handicapped subsidy. However, according to the interviewees, most of those of plantation youths, working in main cities such as Colombo and who returned to estates during the Covid 19 period, or those who reside and work outside (male and/or female youth) did not receive the grants due to the absence of identification or personal registration information of them. According to the field data, 30 per cent of the youth did not receive any social benefits.

Although awareness programmes on prevention against Covid 19, including curtailing the spread were conducted through media (wearing masks, maintaining social distance, washing hands etc.) The plantation workers – male or female workers working during the Covid 19 period, were seen without masks. It should be noted that in the plantation sector, the social distance was not at all maintained. 67% (HI&ES, 2018) of the plantation workers still live in the Line Rooms constructed during the British Colonial period. The space between one Line house and another is hardly 0.3 Meter.

There were many obstacles to the plantation community accessing the state services. According to the administrative system of Sri Lanka, the people have to approach the Divisional Secretariats (a District Secretariat/Government Agent consist of several Divisional Secretariats, based on several factors like population, geography, transportation) to have the matters attended to at the rural level. But there are many

obstacles to the plantation community availing themselves of such services. These have been a feature continuing from the colonial era. The plantation administration or plantation health or plantation education has been vested in the plantation management away from the national stream. The plantation education was brought under the purview of the government (nationalization) after 1972s. But the health and other welfare services of the plantation workers have not been fully absorbed into the national stream. In this background plantation, community/workers, because they are plantation workers and Indian descent (origin), continue to be a DWD community.

Also, whether they are plantation workers, or daily wage workers or returned from cities like Colombo or menial workers who returned to the plantation during the Covid 19 pandemic period, all of them or a vast majority of them had been confronted with food problem daily or starvation most of the time. Vast tracts of land in the plantations are under tea, rubber or coconut cultivation. The wage of a worker there is Rs. 750 per day. This is the lowest pay compared to their counterparts' daily wages at the national level or in other sectors. Management of some plantations, in the meantime, allow the workers to utilize the small blocks of uncultivated lands in the respective neighbourhood for livelihood activities such as home gardening or to keep goats or cows. However, it is noteworthy that most of the plantations have banned such activities denying the workers the opportunity to get additional income or have livelihood enhanced.

The young men and women in the plantations who returned to the plantations with lost em-

<sup>36</sup> The Nation, Punjab decides smart lockdown in cities, 10 November 2020, available at: <https://nation.com.pk/10-Nov-2020/punjab-decides-smart-lockdown-in-cities>

<sup>37</sup> Parhlo, Religious Minorities Accuse Sindh Govt of Discrimination over Ration, 01 April 2020, available at: <https://www.parhlo.com/minorities-sindh-coronavirus/>

ployment and place to stay in main cities could not properly access the self-quarantine facilities. At the same time, such facilities were not available on the plantations too. Even those who had to be quarantined had to live in the same Line room with others (A-Line House is 10' x 12' size on average), as mentioned by interviewees. The young men and women who so returned to the plantation had to stay inside the plantation for two months at a stretch. They took the initiative to cultivate short crops or vegetables or home gardening, helping them meet their day to day needs. However, the workers inhabiting the plantations are a landless community. Hence, they made an effort to clear the uncultivated plots of land to grow vegetables. This created conflicts between plantation management and the youth. There were incidents of management not willing to give away lands for such activities, seeking police intervention. This situation, coupled with the pandemic spread, the plantation community's landlessness, the demand for the same, etc., created the necessity for the workers to have their self needs fulfilled and their livelihood situation addressed.

## Response from the CSOs

1. Creating awareness: Civil Society Organisations have been very active from the first day of COVID-19 infection in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. The CSOs with the support of international organisations extend support to the jobless CDWD. The CSO also provided hygiene materials and awareness support to CDWD. Furthermore, CSO representatives provided continuous support physically and virtually to the government to tackle the situation. The CSO leaders took part in the virtual meetings, talk showed and gave critical opinions of government decisions and mismanagement.

2. Relief and rehabilitation measures: The Civil Society Organization, with the support of inter-

national organisations, provided relief materials to the CDWD in Asia. All the Dalit organizations has been involved in the relief and rehabilitation including NCDHR in India reaching out almost 22,000 families, Nagorik Uddyog reaching more than 10,000 in Bangladesh, and Dalit NGO Federation with help of other Dalit organization reaching 15000 Dalit families in Nepal.

3. Networking systems and remedial mechanism for liaison with state mechanisms: In line with the state mechanism for addressing COVID-19 situation, Civil Society Organizations have been working simultaneously to reduce the spread of this virus. The CSOs in their respective areas work to raise awareness on the preventive measures, limiting mass gathering and mass mobility in public places and supporting the government in relief work. The CSOs also provide support to the government through consultations and giving necessary suggestions wherever required.

4. Research, documentation and advocacy plans: The research institutions, along with relevant government and non-government organisations, have been working together to find out effective ways to reduce the impact of COVID-19 infection. It is to be mentioned that Bangladeshi doctors have found plasma therapy as an effective way to treat COVID-19 patients, and so far, many infected have recovered due to this plasma therapy. The researchers in Bangladesh are collecting information on the success cases of COVID-19 treatment from different countries so that they can save more lives. In addition to that, a ten-member expert team from China was invited to Bangladesh to observe the situation and provide practical suggestions to tackle the problem. The government has maintained steady communication with the countries having business links with Bangladesh so that the business relationship can be on track. Few CSOs have started collecting data on the situation of minority communities during COVID-19 situation and advocating with the local government



the workers inhabiting the plantations are a landless community. Hence, they made an effort to clear the uncultivated plots of land to grow vegetables. This created conflicts between plantation management and the youth.



institutions, government and non-government agencies to ensure social, financial and psychological security of minority groups. But it is felt that comprehensive research on the situation of the CDWD is urgently required so that their needs can be identified and future advocacy plans can be developed accordingly. In Nepal DNF, Samata Foundation and FEDO came up with exploratory research on impact of COVID19 on Dalit communities from various indicators. In India, NCDHR has conducted a large scale app based survey, in which they looked at various schemes and programmes which are supported by the state. This report gave a comprehensive look at the importance of the access to services of Dalit communities. The findings has been disseminated to government officials, parliamen-

tarians and other key stakeholders.

5. Engaging in governmental, Judiciary & media advocacy efforts: Civil society has been playing an essential role by supplementing government initiatives in addressing the COVID-19 situation. The CSOs have been monitoring the status regularly and supporting the government with the necessary information and data. The CSOs have been engaged in online discussions, virtual conferences, writing articles in the newspaper on their observations and suggestions so that it may help the government makes the right decision on time. CSO's advocacy has reflected in the budget where we have observed the maximum allocation in the health and livelihood sectors.



# KEY PROPOSALS FOR STRATEGIC ACTION AT LOCAL, NATIONAL AND GLOBAL LEVEL

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- a. Demand for allocation resources for Disaster Risk Reduction and capacity building for Dalit and other DWD communities through dedicated funds like Sub-Plans
- b. Inclusive, universal coverage of all Dalits and other DWD communities under existing national security schemes particularly those for livelihood and income support, preventive and curative healthcare, food and nutrition security, on an urgent and priority basis.
- c. Economic packages (cash and in-kind assistance) oriented towards Dalit and other DWD communities which allow for flexibility in access to these packages (in terms of documentation required, ability to access the packages etc.) must be rolled out
- d. Introduce social security measures especially for livelihood and income security of informal/unorganised sector workers.
- e. Access to healthcare support and insurance, such as having a government health card with sufficient credit to access healthcare facilities. Access to subsidised sanitation, hygiene and health facilities to Dalit and other DWD communities.
- f. Food packages must be given to families on a weekly basis. Accessibility in remote and rural areas must be provided by Governments. Access to drinking water must also be included in these packages.
- g. Representation of Dalit and other DWD communities in local government is necessary to ensure that their voices are heard and that necessary relief is afforded to the community members.
- h. Anti-discrimination laws and prevention of atrocity laws must be enacted and implemented properly in order to ensure the safety and protection of those who are most vulnerable to exploitation, violence and discrimination. Laws must also ensure the accountability of the State administrative mechanisms.

- i. Specific helplines and access to pathways for reporting cases of violence and atrocities against women, discrimination, access to legal aid, medical assistance, and police assistance must be established.
- j. Higher judicial courts to co-ordinate and hold lower courts accountable in cases of atrocities, discrimination and violence against marginalised communities.
- k. Facilities and arrangements must be made to ensure access to education. Online capabilities should be enhanced, subsidised equipment, and access to these facilities must be provided to Dalit and other DWD communities by the State, even in remote and rural areas.
- l. States must create a database or disaggregated data of individuals to enhance identification of those who have not secured relief entitlements and to ensure that efforts can be made in future for more pointed relief for the most marginalised within the DWD communities, such as women, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals and the elderly. Subsequently ensure that those left behind are prioritised.
- m. Regular monitoring of social security schemes to ensure their effective implementation.
- n. Revamp the spending structures for relief, taking into consideration short term, medium term and long term needs for relief and recovery assistance. Increased spending and targeted, gender responsive budgeting that will take into account
- o. Targeted awareness building campaigns on COVID-19, access to healthcare, access to economic packages, access to justice measure, etc. must be done by States even in the most remote areas of the country. Support for these campaigns can be garnered by recruiting and mobilising youth from the community.

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IMPACT OF  
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Asia Dalit Rights Forum

