

Delhi: Locked out & lucked out, migrants seek policy boost

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in the light of one year of the lockdown which exposed the harsh realities of the labour market.

NEW DELHI: Annapurna was a domestic worker in four houses in Delhi before last year's Covid-19 lockdown and earned up to Rs 10,000 per month. Since then, her struggle to stay afloat went on for almost a year. "My husband lost his job as a waiter and we had to withdraw our 16-year-old son from the private school where he was studying. We were forced to vacate our rented room and move to a smaller place," the 33-year-old said. After nearly a year, Annapurna finally found work last month but makes just Rs 2,000 in a month.

Annapurna was at Jantar Mantar on Thursday alongside other house helps, migrant daily wage earners and commercial sex workers to demand a comprehensive policy for people like them. The protest was organised

HOW COVID TURNED THEIR WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Photos: Sanjeev Rastogi



A resident of Jasola, Shabana has been unemployed since the Covid-induced lockdown was imposed. “None of my previous three employers hired me back after the lockdown was lifted and I failed to find work despite my best efforts. My husband is a daily-wage labourer whose work has been impacted due to pandemic. Migrants also have a right to live with dignity,” said Shabana, demanding a migrant workers’ policy



—Shabana (56) | DOMESTIC HELP

Kumar lost work in the lockdown and struggled to even get food or water. Along with other workers, he travelled nearly 150 kilometres on foot from Haridwar to his native village in Uttar Pradesh. “On reaching home, I had to borrow ₹30,000 to meet my family’s expenses. When the lockdown was lifted, a contractor offered me work at a brick kiln in Punjab, but I was paid a fraction of what was promised and forced to work as a bonded labourer,” he said, adding that some social workers helped him come to Delhi in January



—Rahul Kumar (28) | MIGRANT WORKER

Chand earned a livelihood by selling books on craft and magic, and performed arts and crafts demonstrations in schools across the country for years. Since schools were closed, he works as a daily-wage labourer to support his family. “I used to earn Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000 per month, but my monthly income has now drastically reduced,” said Chand



—Lal Chand (44) | ARTIST

After her two sons started living separately with their families, Reshma (name changed) was forced to become sex worker to support herself around five years ago. “I have no work most days. I am surviving on the ₹10,000 I received during the lockdown as widows’ pension and through donations,” she said

—Reshma (40) | SEX WORKER



Annapurna (33)
DOMESTIC HELP



Keshav Ram
LABOURER



Ram Bharose
LABOURER

Working People’s Charter, an organisation working in the labour sector, collaborated with workers’ bodies on the day’s protest demanding that the Union and state governments immediately notify a migrant worker’s policy and recognise the invisible work of house helps and sex workers. “The states made promises of economic and employment benefits for migrant workers who returned home during the lockdown, but these are far from being met,” said a member of the organising team. “The central government had urged NITI Aayog to formulate policies and schemes to redress the plight of migrant workers, but not much progress has been made.”

Keshav Ram, who trudged over 500km from Noida to Chhattarpur in Madhya Pradesh during the lockdown, said, “With 28 others, I walked for over 10 days to reach home when there was no work or food for us here. However, after staying home for

three months, we returned to Noida for work. Before the lockdown, I used to work on all days, but now I am workless on at least three days of the week.”

Labourer Ram Bharose similarly said, “I was working at a brick kiln in Punjab’s Sangrur but when the lockdown was imposed, my employer asked me to leave. He didn’t even pay me my dues of Rs 1.30 lakh. I returned home to Mohammadpur Jalta village in Uttarakhand, but couldn’t find work. So, I returned to Punjab to work in another brick kiln where again my wages were withheld. I reached Delhi in February and am looking for work.”

Kusum of All India Network of Sex Workers demanded a one-time support of Rs 10,00 for all unorganised workers who are largely invisible in the labour market.

Nirmal Agni, general secretary of Bandua Mukti Morcha which works with bonded labour, said that a migrant workers policy was the need of hour, but the state was not interested. “If something urgent isn't done, we will organise a massive protest on the eve of the lockdown’s anniversary,” Agni said.