



## COVID19 Pandemic Voices from Margins

Webinar series Webinar 7:

Sanitation Worker's Life, Dignity and Health

During Lockdown

Date: April 29, 2020

Minutes

### PANELIST PROFILE:

**Mr. T. Murugan** and **Mrs. Guruvamma Kannimuthu** have been working as sanitation workers under the Periyanaickenpalayam Town Panchayat in Coimbatore District for the past 10 years. Sanitation work has been their family's ancestral occupation for generations. Their major work is to sweep streets, solid waste collection and segregation, transportation from households, and cleaning the stormwater drains periodically. They work 4-6 days a week and for about 4-8 hours each day.

**Mr. Raja** is a Sanitation worker working under the Kotagiri Town Panchayat of Nilgiris district with an experience of almost 13 years. His major work is sweeping streets, solid waste collection, segregation, transportation from households.

**Ms. Sumathu** is a Sanitation worker working under the Kotagiri Town Panchayat of Nilgiris district. She has been working as a sanitary worker for the past 1 year. Her major work is street sweeping and reaching out to the community to collect solid waste collection from households

**Mr. Bhaskar K**, from Tiruchirappalli, is a full-time sanitation worker from the Arunthathiyar community. Every day he collects wastes from the households in the neighbourhood and open areas and unloads them into the dumping truck. The 46-year-old provides for his 3 sons and 2 daughters. He was a painter and a design artist and with the emergence of digital printing technology the job market became insignificant. This forced him to get into contract labour for Trichy Corporation for a basic salary of Rs.6000 per month.

**Speaker 1** from Patna is 40 years old and has been working as a sanitation worker since 2009. His main work is to maintain the pump system. His daily schedule begins from morning 6 am up to 2 pm, sometimes he is required to extend working hours post 2 pm.

**Speaker 2** from Patna, 35 years old has been part of this field since 2007. He is a ground specialist and has been reached out for all activities related to the underground system. His main area of work includes cleaning chambers and sewers.

**Mr. Sanjay** is from Chamari village, Jalaun district, Uttar Pradesh. He has worked as a sanitation worker for over 10 years. He was involved in cleaning gutters and septic tanks, and de-skinning dead

animals and selling them. His wife and mother were also involved in manual scavenging work in their village.

**Gaurav** (name changed) from Delhi has been working as a contract worker with the Delhi Jal Board for the last 5-6 years.

**Mr. Ved Prakash** is the union leader, at present the State President of the Delhi Jal Board Sewer Department Mazdoor Sangh. He joined Delhi Jal Board as a permanent employee in 1995 and has been working with them since 1988 as a contract worker. He has been actively working with sanitation workers for ensuring their rightful entitlements from the days of contractual engagement with DJB.

**Hemlata** is associated with the National Campaign for Dignity & Rights of Sewerage and Allied Workers. Also, she is the Trustee on the Board of Directors of LEDS. She has been associated with the development sector for the last eighteen years. Her major areas of work involve organizing migrant workers from the unorganized sectors such as the construction sector and sanitation work. She is also a petitioner in the Supreme Court in a case related to the sewerage workers.

**Mr. Tom Thomas, Moderator, Praxis** in his keynote emphasized the primary focus of Praxis on the different facets of participatory democracy and one of its ways of establishing it is by visualizing the voices of margins through direct consultations or digitally. This COVID 19 'Voices from Margins' Webinar Series is an idea of that attempt during this lockdown to bring forward the unheard voices as they are facing the brunt of this lockdown. Amongst all the other lessons learned during the pandemic, the one about 'Public Health' is the most important as it is not the Raphael fighter jets or the Chandrayan that has come to our rescue but the Sanitation workers, Nurses, and Doctors of the health system. And this raises issues around our priorities and budgetary allocations as we are aware that the investment in public health has been steadily declining to completely abysmal levels as a percentage of GDP. When juxtaposed the spending on public health vis-à-vis is spent on stockpiling and ammunition or building of statues the picture is quite clear about the current scenario. As moving forward this is a lesson that would stay with all and hoping for more traction in demanding that the public health investments in the country and across the world should be what it needs to be.

**Kavita Wankhade IHS** in her keynote addressed the Tamil Nadu Urban Support Sanitation Programme. As a society, we find it difficult to accept sanitation or wastes as something that needs to be addressed and most prefer not to deal with it. We miss acknowledging that sanitation is fundamental for public health. During these times we realize that sanitation is the basic prevention method. Yes, they keep the city clean but they keep us healthy day in and day out, the narrative never comes out & we as a society do not realize this. Globally the trend is similar for instance in New York, sanitation workers don't go around doing their work because the cities would stop functioning.

Using this moment let me go back to the history of urban planning and go back to London where it all started in the 18th century where sanitation was key to how our cities were planned. Sanitation was key to help a city operate, but somehow in the whole smart city rhetoric and we have forgotten the importance of Sanitation. It's important to remember that in some contexts, we don't realize

whether it's a local body or corporations. Even now, more than 60 to 70 % of people on the payrolls are sanitation workers. We all are familiar with solid workers who come to our house and pick up our garbage & there is a lot around sewage workers who clean our drains but there are also many other roles they play. Few of the other roles they play include street sweeping, drain cleaning, working as desludging operators also commonly known as honeysuckers who clean septic tanks. The community and public toilet cleaners and Indian toilet cleaners are the ones seen in any large institution and that's a huge number in a city. Even in sewage treatment plants, we find sanitation workers working because we do not want to deal with our wastes. These treatment plants are located in one corner of the city and there are technicians and engineers where sanitation workers are taking care of those plants.

Workers (doctor, nurse) in hospitals have been under a lot of attention, it is high time to focus on the workers who are dealing with hazardous wastes too. Many of them are contractual workers, with most being daily wage earners in small, private, and informal enterprises. I'm trying to unbundle it because while many or all of them may be bundled together, their needs and their ability to access any kind of help may be very different. The kind of equipment apart from a mask and a glove the safety requirements of our community toilet cleaners may be very different from somebody who's cleaning or collecting wastes as the risks are different but their safety requirements are equal.

Focusing on the access to insurance scheme the government has announced insurance schemes but many of these schemes are for workers on payroll or contracted but for informal workers who don't even access these schemes might not avail of or might not know about. I want to register one point that has been often forgotten is that we say sanitation workers are vulnerable but within that woman (gender) is an important issue and there is not sufficient data on this. But whatever little we have seen, the more informal it gets, the more vulnerable it becomes. The proportion of women rises & the additional challenges of harassment also increase. And this is again something we need to take cognizance of when we start talking about and what can be done going forward. This is an opportunity for some of the workers as they have received some attention but we as a society must not let this moment slip even when things go back, we must remember that public health and sanitation is important and take this opportunity to strengthen them.

#### **Panelists Discussion:**

**Mr. T. Murugan** has been working as a sanitation worker for the past 20 years. Initially, people did not see us with dignity and later their view changed when villagers started to understand the importance of sanitation workers. We only wore gloves and shoes during rainy seasons. Now we wear safety masks regularly. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I consider my professions as a duty to my society rather than a mere chore. I felt that I have a great responsibility to perform my work amidst the crisis. One of the biggest challenges we faced earlier is the lack of safety equipment. Now we have access and continuous supply of safety equipment for us. Although the need for safety equipment has been addressed we are still not paid our right wages. My family and I have been following all the measures as instructed to keep us intact. Generally, we receive up to four medical checkups which have been a support for us although all our needs haven't been addressed. I always keep people's safety in my mind while working. I have educated my daughter and son well and I don't want my children to continue my work.

**Mrs. Guruvamma Kannimuthu** is a sanitation worker working at Periyanaickenpalayam Panchayat for more than 10 years. Through my work, I have been reaching out to various communities to collect solid wastes from their households. I worship my work as it is the crucial need of the hour. It gives me the contentment of something responsible because as frontline workers, we are fighting against corona. Officers and others provide all kinds of support to do our job without any commotion. The salary provided to us is sufficient enough to tackle our basic needs. Initially, we had a fear of Corona anyway we have to overcome it for the sake of the society and our livelihood. Now, we do not fear corona, rather we fight it each day with courage and confidence. Although with all measures in place as a female sanitation worker it is quite difficult during menstruation.

**Ms. Sumathi** has taken over the profession of sanitation workers traditionally after her mother. During this pandemic, we consider our professions as a service to society. When most of the people are struggling for a livelihood I am privileged to have been working. This profession has given me satisfaction that no profession or worker could get. Safety is the biggest need of the hour and it has been provided to us without any disturbance. Though we have fear of corona, we are overcoming it with the support provided.

**Mr. Raja** has been working as a sanitation worker under the Kotagiri Town Panchayat for the past 13 years. During COVID, the sanitation workers have gained more attention than ever. And we are now recognized for our service and appreciated for it. This can be seen as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu had announced that "all sanitary workers will be called as cleanliness workers (Thooimai paniyalargal in Tamil)". During the lockdown, meals were prepared and catered regularly for the workers. We are also made to drink "Kabasura Kudineer kashayam" to boost our immunity. Earlier we only wore gloves but now we wear a mask and use sanitizers etc. We have been emphasized to follow all the precautionary measures and as to which we also advise people to avoid crowds and follow social distancing. Our only issue is the wages, especially contract workers are paid only Rs. 300 to Rs. 400/ day. We request the government to pay us more to withstand the pandemic.

**Mr. Bhaskar K**, for the past 5 years has been working as a sanitation worker in Tamil Nadu and is paid Rs.7000 per month as salary but that has increased now after the lockdown. Now we can witness the changes in the scenario where workers have been made to wear the safety gear which previously happened once in a blue moon. They make sure that we wash our hands safely from time to time and follow all the necessary precautions with our families too. Before the Pandemic the sanitation workers were not recognized but things have changed. The respect for sanitation workers has increased in our community as the society has started to respect us solely for the work we do, for the same work in which we were looked down on for years. We are not scared and we feel great to be recognized as sanitation workers with dignity for once.

**Speaker 1** (Did not wish to be named), from Patna, 40 years said that the important thing is that we are all working like usual. The masks and the gloves we received were given only once. The masks we got previously were damaged while working but we didn't receive any alternate safety gear. Apart from the safety equipment as sanitation workers, we have been paid very less wages and it is difficult to manage every expense with what we are paid. We have also not received any intimation for EPF benefit. It is getting difficult for us to manage our daily meals. With just Rs. 9000 what will I be able to manage? Food or rent or my family expenses? In the case of soaps, we have received it only once from the government. The authorities are only concerned about the work; they don't care

if we have received a meal or not. We work so hard and with all this, if the disease catches me I will die. We have no ESI or EPF benefits nor the details of both. But we are still putting our lives at risk and working for the public. With no Ration card, I don't receive any free ration, hence I am not sure about how my family and I will be benefited from any of the current schemes.

**Speaker 2** (Did not wish to be named) said during lockdown we have been doing our duty but have not been benefited by any of the government schemes. There is not a ration card or any supportive documents that are available with me. How can we take care of our family in this situation? The masks and gloves that we were provided with have worn out and we have also not been getting paid properly. With regards to payments, there is no fixed time for dispersing the payment as there have been cases where we had to beg for it. At times we had received it at the end of the month. Only when people are frustrated with us our payment is released and the amount paid is also not common for all. The workers have never received the full payment as they are provided with some random reason for the deduction. An amount of Rs. 1000 was deducted from my salary and the reason stated was that I had taken leave of absence. I request that if these issues can be looked upon, needful changes can be done for us.

**Mr. Sanjay** is from Chamari village, Jalaun district, Uttar Pradesh. In Jalaun, Manual scavenging exists and those who are involved in this work have a toll on their health and children's health. In addition to this, their children are discriminated against in schools. I used to remove dead animals from homes; take out their skins and sell them but I left this job two to three years ago. I also used to clean gutters and septic tanks. My wife was also a manual scavenger 3 years ago. We joined with the Bundelkhand Dalit Adhikar Manch (BDAM) and tried to work on the issue of manual scavenging. We went to Lucknow and protested, where we received Rs.40,000 based on the rehabilitation act. But no other benefits such as government jobs, education for children, etc were received. Even today people involved in manual scavenging in Jalaun only get old leftover food and old clothes. Most of these families do not own ration cards or any health benefits. The government has announced that people will get free ration but due to the lack of ration cards, they are unable to access free ration. It has been announced by the Prime Minister that we can work under MGNREGA, but for the last 2 years, no work has been initiated in our village. Around 300 families are still waiting for wages from this scheme. MNREGA is a scheme that has not been preferred by my people in our village as we have to wait for the money.

**Mr. Gaurav** (name changed upon request) from Delhi has been working with the sewerage line department. Currently, I have been carrying out sanitization work in different localities of Delhi. I feel the only way out for improving the conditions of the contractual labour is to provide them with permanent employment that can ensure benefits. Working from 9 am to 5 pm we have only received one uniform from the Delhi Jal Board and no other safety gears have been provided. We had received sanitizers but yet to get soaps. The contractual system should not be followed and it is better if the salary would be transferred to our accounts on a fixed date. At present, we receive it in the form of a cheque.

**Mr. Ved Prakash**, a union leader from Delhi, emphasised how the government wants to get work done but does not think about the status of the workers. Workers were supposed to be provided with masks, gloves, and bodysuits but this has not yet happened. We have tried our level best to reach out to the decision-makers but nothing has changed. In the hospital, the health service

providers are given protection gears as they engage with patients but these workers are in the worse and grave situation they clean up all the wastes on streets. The sanitation workers are also in danger and in this situation, the government cannot afford to lose these workers as they are equally important to health workers while they have been risking their lives to serve the people. There are many promises made in meetings but nothing has been implemented into gestures on the ground. The Delhi Mayor has said that if the sanitation worker gets COVID-19, then they will receive Rs. 10 lakh, but no such thing has seen the light of day. We require at least Rs. 50 lakh as compensation for the sanitation workers as they are also on par with doctors and nurses in saving our lives. They have no insurance or medical cover whereas the authority is also not transparent as the rights of workers have been exploited. They have not been paid even the minimum wage and if any worker speaks out about this they are terminated from work. Until this system is in place it is very difficult to improve the condition of sanitation workers. There should be no contract workers as all workers should be registered. The government should provide safety equipment and rightful payments to the workers at least in these times but this has not happened so far.

**Ms. Hemlata** shared about the declaration of compensation of Rs.10 lakh declared by the Supreme Court. The sanitation workers should be provided with mandated safety gear while working but during the lockdown, they have only been provided with few masks and sanitizers most of which have been worn out and in situations of a pandemic, there has to be regularisation of work. The important issue that needs to be addressed is insurance which is not only for the workers but also for their families. Due to the lockdown, the need for contractual labour has increased and none of these workers have been provided with any training. These contractual workers do not get any insurance benefits and no extra precaution is taken for them. The wages paid is very less and the benefits of insurance extend only for the previously existing workers and now the newly appointed.

**Vinitha** from IIHS shared the Research Findings of Study with Sanitation Workers in Coimbatore and Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu done by Praxis & IIHS.

#### **Key Findings:**

- **Work and Wages during the lockdown:** Among 45 interviewed, 27 work with the same wages and 7 got more wages during the lockdown indicates that 12 workers haven't received a salary for March
- **Testing:** 26 respondents reported that the testing facility is available for sanitation workers and 22 of them said that they can access it regularly **Access to risk areas (hotspots):** While 17 of them reported that they don't receive any additional support while entering the risky/hotspot areas, 19 out of 45 workers reported that they are allowed or to enter hotspot areas with restrictions and 10 of them mentioned that there are no such restricted areas
- **Status of care and support for COVID +ve:** None of the 45 workers have come across or heard about COVID positive sanitation worker in their area
- **Stigma and Discrimination:** Among 45 interviewed, 23 reported that their social mobility being affected due to lockdown, 3 workers reported that they are not allowed to enter in specific locations and 15 workers said that their social mobility was not affected. While 13 of them reported that stigma by service users and 21 by society. No one reported stigma among their neighbourhoods and 3 reported that there is no stigma during the lockdown. 82% of the sanitation workers said that society will view sanitation workers with dignity after lockdown

- **Relief Entitlements:** Interviewees were asked about 3 schemes- PDS, Jan Dhan, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana. Among 42 families eligible out of 45, 40 received PDS and Cash. Among 35 families eligible for the Jan Dhan scheme, only 6 received Rs.500. Among 19 eligible families to access free gas cylinder under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, only 7 received a free cylinder as of now. Only 3 received other schemes or benefits (apart from these 3 schemes) i.e RS.1000/- is paid through TAHDCO to the person who is members of the sanitation worker welfare board.

**Vijay Praxis** shared that in some locations of Patna the quality of the masks distributed was poor. In other locations, masks and kits were not provided. In such cases, sanitizers and handwashes have been purchased by workers and not provided by the government. The sanitation workers are expected to go inside the drainage systems on streets and households. For workers in Raja Bazaar area of Patna, they have not yet received their salary. The last salary that they had received was Rs. 9000 from which Rs. 3000 was deducted without explanations. In Kankarbagh, the workers were verbally informed that their salary would be deducted and the amount would be transferred to the PM Cares fund. The workers say that they are corona warriors as equal to that of police and health workers but their situation has only degraded further. Many of the women workers pointed out that they are not being treated well, unlike the doctors and nurses and those at the forefront feel that they should receive more protection from the government. The Government should focus on sanitation workers as they have been working directly on the ground. A sanitation worker said: that "People used to practise untouchability with us before this, and many are still following this at this time of a pandemic. With all that has been going on the government should at least give salary on time." Some have received Rs. 500 under the Jan Dhan scheme, but no other scheme benefits have been received by the sanitation workers.

**Bezwads Wilson**, National Convener of the Safai Karmachari Andolan and Ramon Magsaysay award winner, emphasised in his keynote addressed the effects of this pandemic on society as a whole. The most vulnerable group is the sanitation workers as they are the ones that are outside when everyone else is safer inside. The main issues with sanitation workers are that their houses are so small and they cannot maintain any distance at all. Why do we use a big tagline as Personal Protective Equipment? The government provides them with gloves only once and even in the case of masks, it is given only once. The provided masks are also not washable & that again is a very big problem. At the workplace, everybody is asked to wash every half hour but with what do they wash it? There is no water to drink but they expect the sanitation workers to wash. The government has not provided them with the basics like water which is most required this summer but expects them to spend water on washing. They have also not been provided with any soaps for washing. The government has not been thinking about this but most of the sanitation workers grew up in small communities as they think they are helping the society with their work. But the problem is when they want to go back to home their families fear that they might be bringing back the virus. Even during the lockdown, we could still witness Sewage workers and Septic tank workers continuously working.

Even in the National Capital, Delhi the sanitation workers have not been paid salaries for three months. Even without paying them, the government has been asking them to work regularly but other government workers who have not been working have been receiving salaries regularly. This reminds me of the untouchability practices existing in India even before the lockdown. If they're not

willing to go home as they might take the virus back where will you provide them stay? For sanitation workers the government has been providing accommodation in roadsides and Ashram but for essential workers, they have been providing hotels and restaurants. With all this differentiation the food supplied to both the category of people is also different. At least during this pandemic, we must understand that all citizens are equal despite whoever is giving the essential services and should be provided with the right wages. Understanding and recognizing everybody's work during this time is essential. The central and the state government should come with a package for the sanitation workers as it is their responsibility to protect them. The sanitation workers are the ones directly dealing with human wastes, medical wastes, and fickle matters. What are the precautions that the government has been taking for them? These are the most important issues that need to be noted during the lockdown. Likewise, it is the responsibility of the society as well as the government to ensure the safety of the Sanitation Workers.

**Question & Answer Session:**

**Question (Vanisree):** Are sanitation workers facing any stigma from the general population during the corona pandemic situation?

**Response (Vijay):** In Bihar, terms of untouchability workers have to face untouchability as apartments don't want these workers

**Question (Swati):** What are the issues they are facing now in COVID -19. Do they have any salary revision and additional payment? If yes how much

**Question (Samiksha):** Are there any measures the Delhi government has taken for safai karamchari to help them? or to end the contract system?

**Question (Swati):** I think there are no schemes and benefits for contractual workers. Comments?

**Response (Hemlata):** On Contract System and their salary revision: There is no policy. The appointment is generally done by the vendors, especially in Delhi Jal Board. There is no salary revision for contractual workers. At some places they get Rs. 7000 somewhere Rs. 10,000

When the tender is finished, a break is given and there is no salary revision for the contractual worker but it is there for permanent workers.

**Question (Sumita):** Do you think that sanitation workers' situation is better in the South in comparison to the North?

**Question (Rex):** Are they reporting more positive experiences because of efficient administration in these places?

**Response (Siva Prasad):** The governments still have not opened up to the basic issues of the sanitary workers. The studies brought out many vulnerabilities. We need to come up some resolution and forward it to both Central and State Governments



Response (Praxis): Also, in Tamil Nadu, organisations have been working with the government to ensure better working conditions for sanitation workers.

**Question (Srijan):** Is there any way to highlight the various issues at this time, since people are more receptive and appreciative of the work done by Sanitation workers, in terms of bargaining power, to be treated well?

**Response (Hemlata):** No one has got PPE kits. They have only got masks and gloves. It has always been our demand to give them full body suits, but this has still not happened.

**Question:** Are the sanitation workers during pandemic also facing any discrimination?

**Response (Hemlata):** The workers generally carry their meals with themselves previously they used to get in the locality. The sanitation workers I have interacted with have not shared any other incidents of discrimination.

**Question (Vedprakash):** Are there screening and test kits available for sanitation workers?

**Response (Vijay):** In Bihar, no such kits have been provided either. And they use the same half-jacket which they used earlier.

**Question (Manisha):** How could you see the caste, gender, and caste-based occupation interlinked and especially the gender aspects with the difference between manual scavenging and sanitation work? (Addressed by Kavita during her introductory speech)

Kavita: According to the definition whoever manually cleans the human excreta are called manual scavengers. The women who clean the road of waste with human and animal excreta also come under manual scavengers. We have to understand the major burden of work with a gender perspective and a load of social pressure with caste-based occupation differentiates the term or name.

**Question (Richa):** From the discussion so far, I could understand that there seems a serious lacking of professionalization and monetization of sanitation workers and the sector too which is being spotted in the pandemic situation. Therefore, could experts highlight or enlist the number of enabling factors that could solve the problems and help the sanitation workers at large? (Addressed by Bezwada Wilson)

#### **Recommendations:**

Persons engaged in the sanitary workers are from the vulnerable sections of the society all over. Can we raise issues of minimum wages for all the sanitary workers, regular or contractual?

**Krishnadas:** Use of technology in the case of sanitation workers to the full extent