

# CAUGHT IN A BIND:

A STATUS REPORT ON UNCERTAINTY &  
DISTRESS AMONG GURUGRAM'S UNORGANISED WORKERS



**GURGAON NAGRIK EKTA MANCH**  
**12 JUNE 2020**

*Photograph by Vinay Gupta*



@Gurgaon Nagrik Ekta Manch, June 2020


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 Gurgaon Nagrik Ekta Manch

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*Cover Photograph by Ishan Tankha*

## Executive summary

Millions of hardworking Indians find themselves at the precipice of extreme poverty owing to the lockdown. In a bid to offer immediate relief the Gurgaon Nagrik Ekta Manch, like many other civil society groups, has raised funds and organised the distribution of over 25,000 household ration kits to sustain approximately 100,000 people for 10 days as well as over 20 lakh cooked meals to the needy in the city.

Building on our first report released 27th April, which documented distress and urged the administration to address it by universalizing PDS, this second report is a situation analysis of the conditions of workers at a time of transition out of the lockdown. Our findings are based on telephonic IVR-based surveys as well as conversations with workers during food relief efforts.

### Food distress persists, administration's efforts inadequate

- The administration delayed implementation of distress PDS at scale during the peak period of food distress (April and May) in Gurugram, when migrants were unable to leave the city
- Withdrawal of cooked meal facilities has compounded distress of those (37%) who were depended on them

### We urge the administration to

- Expedite distress rations to all non-ration card holders, which should have been the systemic response to large-scale distress
- Make applicant and verification lists public
- Resume community kitchens for clusters dependent on them like Sarhol, Khandsa and Manesar
- Consider a universalized PDS mechanism with simple registration and minimal verification procedures to sustain migrants for next few months until employment stabilizes

### For many, cash reserves have dwindled to the last Rs 500

- 87% of daily wage workers and 75% of those with regular monthly incomes responding from the Khandsa cluster had less than Rs 500 left

### Re-employment tepid, daily wagers and self-employed most affected

- 60% of daily wage workers and 42% of those who work in factories have not started work
- Demand for workers in factories is low owing to social distancing norms, disrupted supply chains
- 44% of self-employed workers have not yet been able to restart work owing to negligible demand, lack of capital to restart business

### Debt rises, especially among the self-employed

- 25% of our respondents did not take loans, relied on savings/family
- 30% took loans of up to Rs 2000, 24% between Rs 2000 and 5000 and 8% above Rs 8000
- Self-employed workers reported more debt (44% had borrowed between Rs 5000 and 8000)
- A third of daily wage workers and permanent workers borrowed up to Rs 2000, one-fifth borrowed between Rs 2000 and Rs 5000

### Rental demands not persistent, but a source of anxiety

- Only 25% of our respondents faced pressure from landlords to pay rents, but in the absence of moratoriums or waivers, cumulative rentals owed to landlords are source of anxiety for migrants

### Decisions to stay/return contingent upon employment prospects, varies by state

- 30% of migrants eager to return immediately, 40% planning to wait
- Only 30% of our respondents have no intention of leaving the city
- A higher proportion of migrants from Assam, Bihar and West Bengal wish to return immediately,
- A large proportion from Uttar Pradesh (64%) are willing to wait for employment
- The administration's handling of migrant transportation via Shramik trains and buses has been chaotic, with last minute announcements resulting in mismatches between reporting travelers and available seats.
- A transparent well-managed system is required to meet pending demands of migrants to return to home locations, in keeping with the SC orders.





## Introduction

The COVID-19 induced lockdown has placed a large number of Indians in conditions of economic uncertainty, most of all informal sector workers who had meagre social security nets and savings to tide them by an extended period of unemployment. The Development Data Group of the World Bank has estimated that the pandemic could push 12 million Indians into extreme poverty, which it defines as living on less than \$1.9 a day.

In our last report released 27th April 2020, we documented how the extension of Lockdown 1 in mid-April immediately manifested in a sudden spike in distress calls for rations in Gurugram where our relief work has been focused. In our reading, this happened because workers were expected to be re-employed at the end of the first lockdown. Subsequent lockdowns have substantively increased their anxiety over daily survival.

It is a testament to the sheer scale of distress, as well as a fallout of the government's inefficiency in distributing free food grains in a timely manner, that the demands for food relief have not ebbed. In fact, demands have surfaced from new socio-economic categories revealing that extended economic uncertainty is not a burden that even middle-class India is in a position to bear. In our last report, we had also identified hunger hotspots in Gurugram that would have specifically benefited from the administration's focused attention. The rising number of containment zones in the city – with many of these being in the hunger hotspots – has meant a double whammy of disease and hunger for these communities, especially because civil society was unable to provide relief rations in containment zones. On another note, large numbers of migrant workers have returned to origin states, destabilizing demand patterns for food relief.

In this report, we report the results of a telephone-based survey conducted using GNEM's own database of phone numbers. The survey was conducted with the primary intent of aiding and informing our own strategies on relief work going forward, given the rapidly changing circumstances. The overall objective is to understand the profile of those who are still in food-related distress in Gurugram and get insights into what kind of vulnerabilities they have experienced, especially with regards to employment, wages, debt, housing and food. Additionally, we sought some insights on plans that migrants have to return home or remain in Gurugram.

## Methodology

The phone-based survey was rolled out in two phases, using an automated IVR system. The first round of the survey was completed on 14th May and focused on a basic needs assessment to streamline and expand distribution efforts. Since then 5000 people have shared these basic details such as employment type, wages and cash and food reserves with GNEM. After this basic needs assessment was completed, verification calls were made by GNEM volunteers and details of exact location and number of members in the group or family noted. After ration kits were distributed to those whose information was verified, a second IVR survey was conducted in the last week of May. The focus of this round was to understand the current conditions of those that GNEM had provided rations and assess their need for continued support, government intervention and travel.

Spatially, IVR-2 targeted those living in Khandsa urban village, which is located adjacent to one of the city's prominent industrial clusters. Khandsa region includes Khandsa Village, Saraswati Nagar, Anjana Colony and Sector 10. GNEM has been distributing ration kits in the industrial cluster of Khandsa since the first week of the lockdown. So far approximately 5000 ration kits have been distributed catering to about 20,000 people.

## Profile of respondents

GNEM's database, built through the calls that we received on our helpline numbers, comprises the most vulnerable sections of society in Gurugram. The profile data from IVR-1 indicates that

- The majority (68%) of those who GNEM delivered ration kits to earn daily wages while the rest get paid a monthly salary.

- A little over 70% (of 1790 workers) earn less than Rs 300 on a daily basis. Of those who get paid monthly, 60% earn between Rs 6000-9000.
- In terms of accommodation, nearly 60% live in jhuggies and 36% in rented accommodations, usually 5-6 people in cramped single rooms. Only a small section (7%) reported that they were in a labour camp or construction site at the time of the survey.

## KEY FINDINGS

### FOOD

#### Continued food distress, distress ration system a non-starter

GNEM's first report highlighted the failure of the Government of Haryana in recognizing and addressing hunger, especially among migrant populations. While comparatively poorer states such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand issued orders to expand the PDS coverage to non-ration card holders in the first week of the lockdown itself, the Haryana government only took cognizance of hunger distress amongst the working poor as late as April 14 when an order to distribute distress ration coupons to "needy families" was issued. Our report had pointed out that unclear procedures and lack of accessible public data made access daunting for the vulnerable.

Over a month later, these basic questions still remain unaddressed. There is no transparency about who is part of the local committees that will conduct door-to-door surveys and what is the criteria for verification. Let alone ordinary citizens, even civil society groups that are in the thick of ration distribution efforts in order to meet the food needs of a vast population of the working class in Gurgaon who are left out of the thin PDS coverage in the district have been unable to cut through the opaqueness of these orders. Persistent inquiries to officials in the district administration have yielded patchy information such as "8000 distress ration coupons have been approved" and "4000 have been printed". However, there is no clear public data on how many people/households were surveyed, on what basis approvals were given and whether the "printed" coupons have been distributed and whether those who have received the coupons have also collected the rations they are entitled to.

Just before the third extension of the lockdown, on May 14th, the Finance Minister announced free rations for 8 crore migrants across the country. There is no clarity on how this announcement will benefit the large number of migrant workers who work in Gurgaon's industrial clusters. While recent media reports show that foodstocks in Haryana are rotting, the state government continues to drag its feet in distributing rations to those who need it most.

This statement from Chandan, a migrant worker from Bihar who works as a helper in one of the export houses, and a resident of Khandasa reveals the lethal combination of being stranded far from home, without work and savings and an absconding contractor -

**“ please kuch ration bhijwa dijiye, khaane-peene ka kuch nahi hai humare paas. Hum log bahut pareshaan hai. Aap hi bataaiye kaise hoga hum log ka? Ya toh gaon bhijwa dijiye gaadi se. Labour ka kaam karte hai. Company waala paisa bhi nahi de raha. Jo kaam kiye hai woh paisa bhi nahi diya. Bura haal hai. Hum 9 log hai. ”**

**[Please send us some rations, we do not have anything to eat. We are very worried. You tell me how will we manage here? Can you help us to reach our village? We work as labour and our employer has not paid us, not even for the days we have already worked. We are in trouble. We are 9 of us.]**

## Those dependent on cooked meals face particular distress

One of the few initiatives that the Gurugram administration has taken towards food relief – beyond actively encouraging (and taking credit for) civil society and private efforts – has been setting up feeding centres where cooked meals were provided. Feedback received through our calls indicate that these centres were shut on the 25th of May, even though alternative arrangements of providing rations to those who came to the feeding centres are yet to be made. For those dependent on cooked means (about 37%), this withdrawal has exacerbated distress.

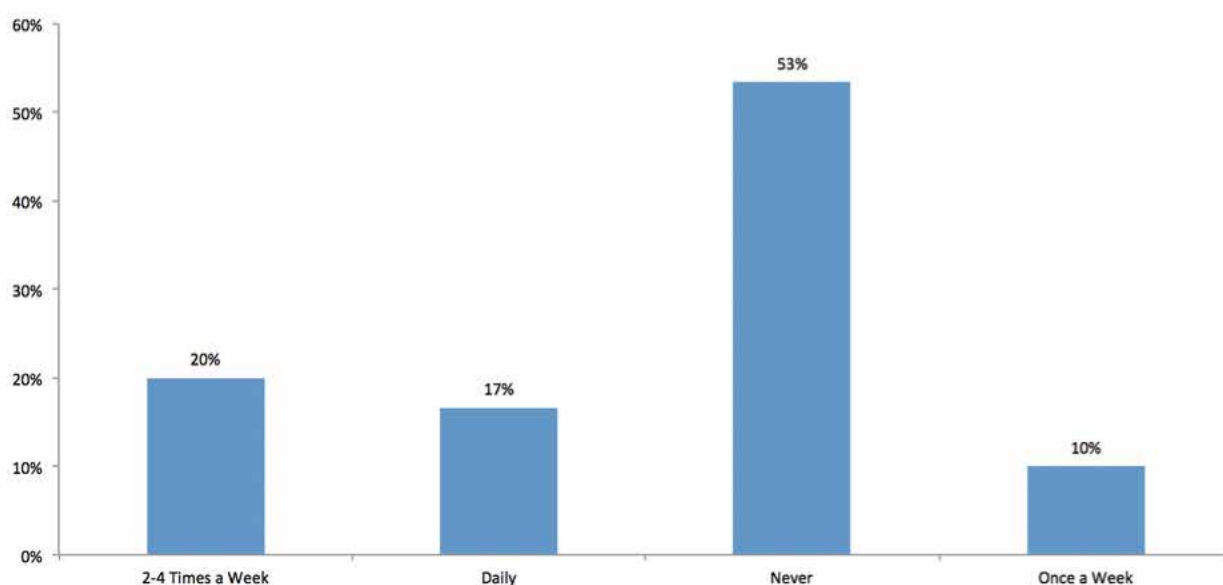
Meena Devi, a 25-year old woman and mother of three children lived close enough to the government run feeding centre and would eat at least one of their meals there. However, after the feeding centre shut down, the frequency of her calls to GNEM volunteers increased -

“*jab se community centre mein khaana batna band hua hai, ab bahut zyaada dikkat hai. Ration ki zaroorat hai*

*[We are in deep trouble ever since the community center stopped giving out cooked meals. We need rations.]*”



*Migrants from Madhya Pradesh starting their 450km journey home from Gurgaon's golf course road.*



*Fig 1: Frequency of consumption of cooked meals (N= 330)*

## Recommendations: Food

Expedite distress ration distribution, disclose data and keep community kitchen running till distress subsidies

- Following the Finance Minister's directive, it becomes even more urgent that the Haryana government expedite its efforts at distributing distress rations to those in need but who don't possess a ration card here.
- The administration must make applicant and verification lists public and if necessary, engage civil society in preparing distribution lists in communities. Distribution figures must be made public.
- This exercise should also be made a basis for expanding PDS coverage in the state in the long term.
- Community kitchens must be kept running in distress hotspots like Sarhol, Khandsa and Manesar and their timings be moved to suit those who have started working.

## LIVELIHOOD & WAGES

### Daily wage workers least likely to be back at work

With the economy creaking to life again in fits and starts, and with containment zones expanding as well as shifting locations constantly, livelihood insecurity remains extremely high. Daily wage workers are the worst impacted by these uncertainties, followed by industrial workers. Our data shows that:

- 60% of daily wage workers and 42% of those who work in factories have not started work.
- In fact, according to 45% of those who work in factories for a monthly wage, factories have begun operations, but they are still waiting to be called back to work.
- This is also, surprisingly, true for 34% permanent factory employees. Given that social distancing norms need to be adhered to, companies are only calling back a few workers who are being made to work longer hours, often for no overtime.

Mukesh from Sarhol who works in an export house tells a GNEM volunteer, "kaam toh chaalu ho gaya hai par poori tarah nahi hua hai. Mere floor mein 8 export line the, abhi do hi chal rahe hai aur maalik advance payment bhi nahi de raha hai. Kehta hai tum paisa le kar ghar bhaag jaaoge. Ab gas bharaane ke paise bhi nahi hai"

[Work has started, but only partially. My floor had 8 export lines, but right now only 2 are operational. The owner is not making advance payments. He suspects we will run away with the money. Now I only have enough money to replenish cooking fuel.]

Because re-employment in Gurgaon is dependent not just on local conditions, but also on national and global supply chains, it is likely to take many more weeks for employment to be fully restored in production units. It is worrying that while US and European economies are slowly reviving and global orders are being placed, India is still to peak as far as Covid-19 infections are concerned. If this trend continues until September as is being suggested by the medical fraternity, Indian companies will be struggling to take and fulfill orders. Service sector employment remains even more uncertain given the sudden increase of Covid-19 cases in Gurugram and related delays in the opening of malls and the hesitation in employers to run offices to optimum capacity.

It is worth noting that a significant proportion (44%) of self-employed workers have not yet been able to restart work. It is no wonder that our distress calls include pleas from households who are experiencing this extent of economic distress for the very first time.



Ram Kumar, who has his own loading cart in Khandsa tells a GNEM volunteer

“ *Mai loading-unloading waala redi chalaata hoon aur lockdown ke pehle din mein 300 se 400 rupay kama leta tha. Abhi jab se kaam khula hai, ek hafte mein do din hi kaam mila aur Rs 100-150 hi kama paaya. Itne mein ghar ka kharcha kaise chalega. Ab kya karein, biwi ko bhi ghar bhejna hai* ”

*[I work as a loader using a handcart and used to earn Rs 300-400 a day before the lockdown. Now since work has started, I only get work two days a week and I have earned only Rs 100-150 on those days. How can I manage my household expenses with such little income? I also want to send my wife home. What do I do?]*

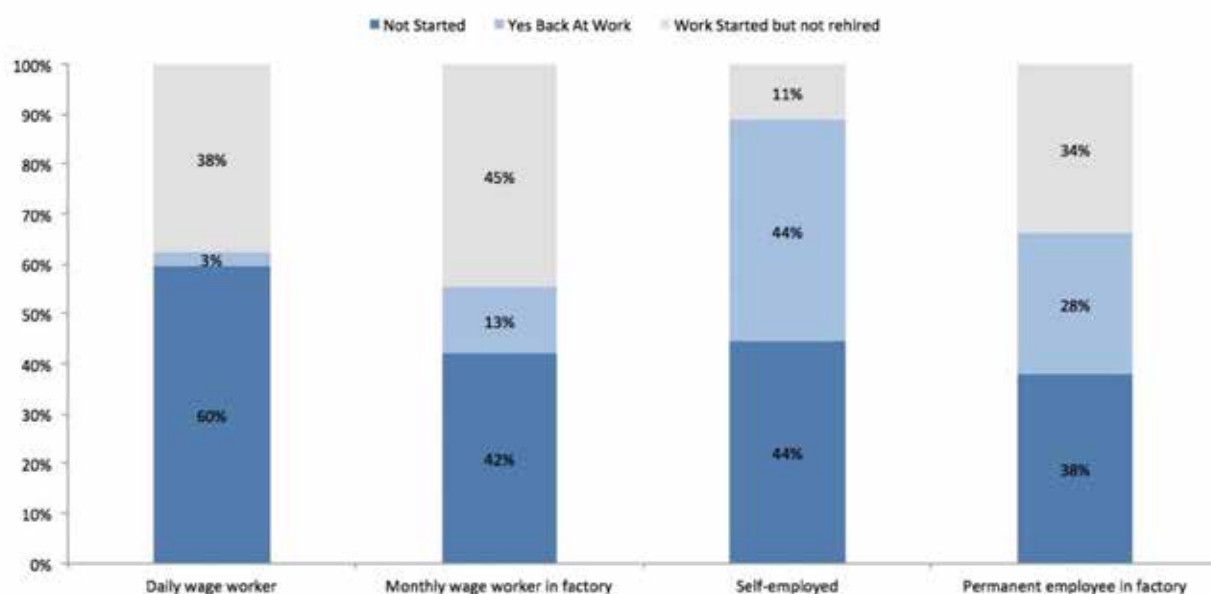


Fig 2: Re-employment status (N=288)

## Recommendations: Livelihoods and social security

Amongst the measures the government can consider are

- Funds to re-capitalize micro-entrepreneurs like street vendors, small grocery stores etc. while building awareness around social distance norms, zones for vending and stopping harassment and evictions
- Grievance mechanisms in cases wages are renegeed or overtime not paid by employers should also be put in place
- The state government must proactively register workers under the BoCW act and also disclose data on how many registered workers have been given benefits after the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana was announced.

## Dwindling cash reserves, with most down to their last 500 rupees

According to reports, nearly 80% of migrant workers in Gurugram had not been paid their wages for the period of the lockdown. This is unsurprising given that the Government of India withdrew its own March 29 order that made the payment of wage to employees mandatory on May 17th. Releasing employers from this obligation and not announcing any financial assistance has left millions of migrant workers (temporary and settled) with barely any cash reserves. Amongst the people from Khandsa that reached out to GNEM, 87% of daily wage workers had less than Rs 500 left. Even 75% those with a relatively reliable source of monthly income had less than Rs 500 left.

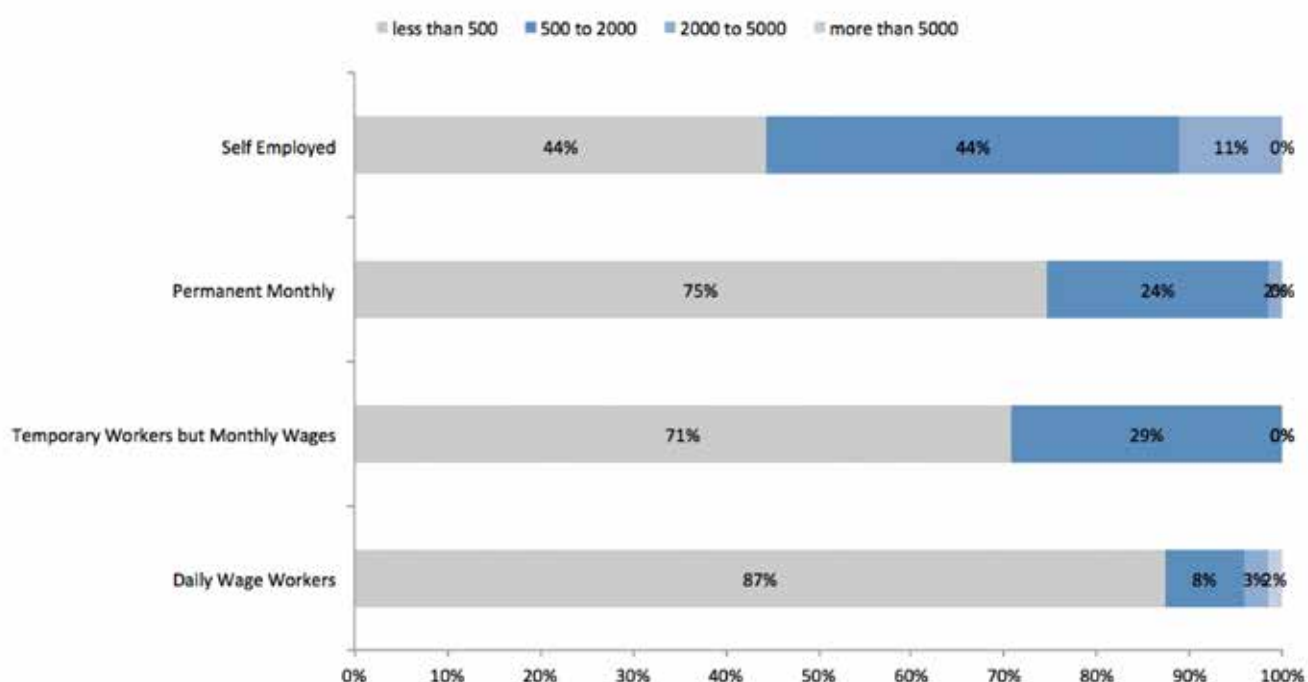


Fig 3: Cash reserves by type of employment (N= 299)

## Debt increases, especially among the self-employed

In order to understand how much debt people have accumulated during the period of the lockdown, we asked the amount of outstanding loans or credit lines that people have taken to buy essentials.

- While a quarter did not need to take loans and relied on savings or perhaps asked family for money, 30% took loans of up to Rs 2000, 24% between Rs 2000 and 5000 and 8% above Rs 8000. Conversations with migrants indicate that many do not have strong social networks in Gurugram, from where they can take informal loans; in contrast, the prospect of borrowing money to survive would have been easier in their home locations.

- A greater proportion of those who are self-employed have taken larger loans with 44% reporting that they had borrowed between Rs 5000 and 8000.
- In comparison, one-third of both daily wage workers and those with a regular monthly income borrowed up to Rs 2000 and one-fifth borrowing Rs 2000 to 5000.

As we have indicated before, making distress calls for ration was a last resort for self-employed households; the data supports that they relied as much as possible on credit before asking for free food. It is not only this segment, but households across the income spectrum that have indicated that relying on charity to survive has been a deeply undignified experience for them.

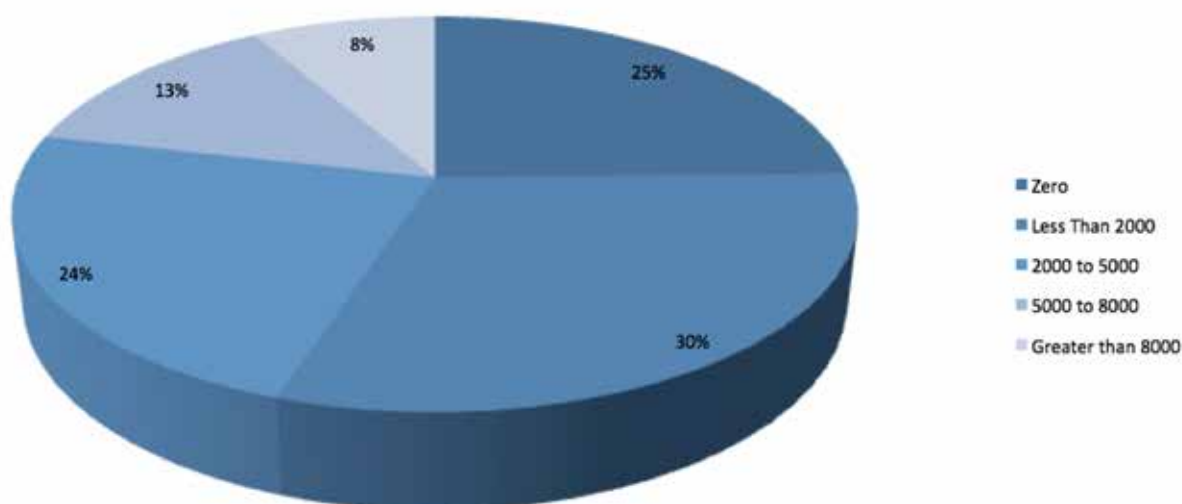


Fig 4: Loans taken (N=345)

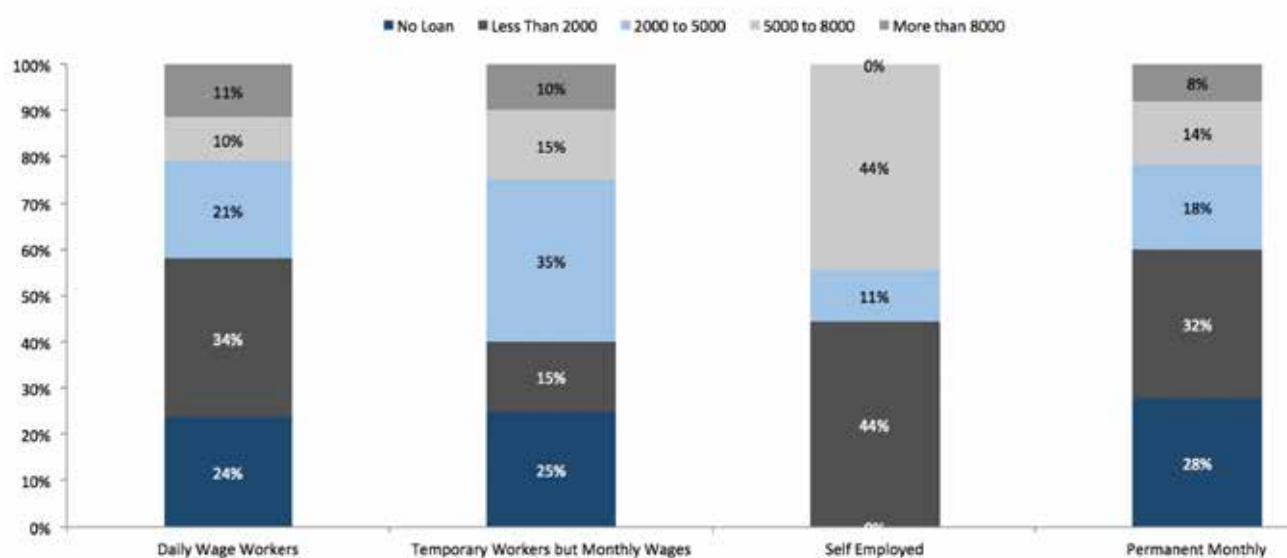
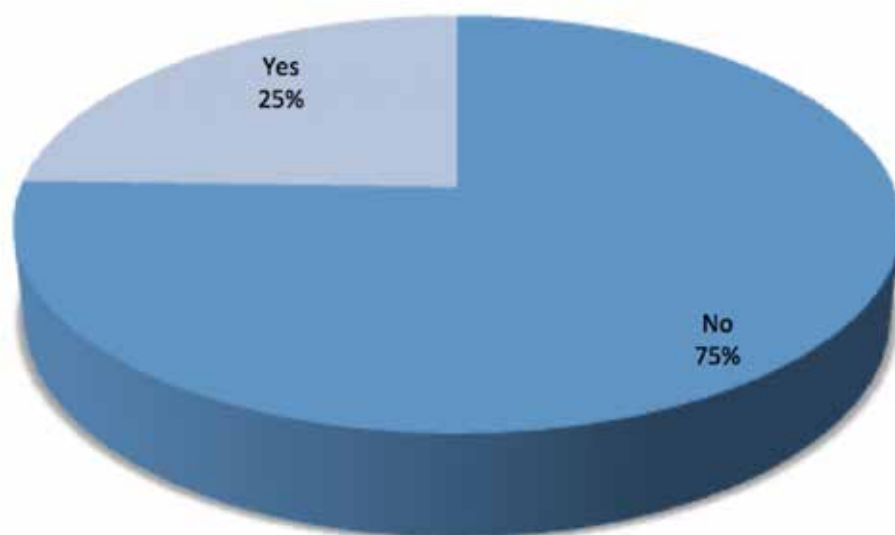


Fig 5: Loan amounts by type of employment (N=288)

## HOUSING

A key aspect of anxiety has been around the inability to pay housing rents. While three fourths of our respondents denied any form of pressure to pay rents from the landlord, qualitative evidence indicates that prolonged unemployment and loss of wages has undermined the confidence of renters to pay cumulative rentals. Other than rent, migrants have reported high levels of surveillance from landlords during the lockdown, and threats of violence if they were perceived to be breaking rules in any way.



*Fig 6: Pressure for payment of rentals (N= 326)*

### Recommendations: Housing

Worker housing has been a long-standing demand and recent announcements from the Government of India also indicate policy thinking is in favor of the development of rental housing complexes. Haryana government must quickly develop context specific solutions for its industrial and urbanized districts, involving employers, private sector as well as utilize its own land and resources where possible to construct worker housing. In the immediate term, the government should consider offering rental vouchers to migrants who want to stay but are being pressured for rent by landlords.

## RETURN TO HOME STATES

There is no doubt that cumulative anxieties around income, food and rent as well as the fear of the disease have influenced the decision for many to return to their native villages to wait out this period of uncertainty. GNEM has also been involved in assisting migrant workers with travel when they have stated a wish to return to their home states.

In early May, the Government of Haryana set up an online portal for migrant workers who wanted to leave the state and those who wanted to return. News reports on 9 May reported, citing data from the portal, that

approximately 8 lakh people registered to leave and 1.5 lakh wished to return to the state. Another news report on 30 May claimed that 3.25 lakh workers had already been sent to their native states from Haryana in 96 trains and 5,200 buses. It further claimed that 72 trains went to Bihar followed by 17 to Madhya Pradesh while most of the stranded migrants of Uttar Pradesh were sent home via buses. Approximately 27,000 (one third of 80,000) migrants from Gurgaon still wanted to return to their native states and 97% of them were looking for the government assistance for travelling.



*Emptied out shanties in sector 65 of Gurgaon*

#### **Our data indicates that:**

- 30% of migrants are eager to return immediately, while 40% are planning to wait a little more before they return.
- Only 30% of our respondents have no intention of leaving the city.
- Among migrants from Assam, Bihar and West Bengal, a higher proportion wished to return immediately, while 50% of those from Jharkhand did not wish to return. The majority of respondents from Uttar Pradesh (64%) appeared to be willing to wait it out.

According to Ram Kumar, a migrant from Bihar working in Gurgaon,

**“ bakaaya kiraaya ki wajah se bahut log turant ghar jaane ki stithi mein nahi hai ”**

**[many people want to return home immediately because of pending rental payments]**



***700 people spend the night outside in Tau Devi Lal stadium because the shramik train could not accommodate them***

In our understanding, the demand for transport to return home is closely linked to the pace of re-employment. Amid reports from across the country of employers facilitating the transportation of migrant workers from the places of origin to cities, mobility patterns are likely to fluctuate considerably in the coming weeks.

The June 2nd fiasco at Tau Devi Lal stadium where over 700 migrants were made to wait for nearly 36 hours before being put on buses that were hastily organized with a lot of help from civil society groups, raises some concerns.

First, there seems little clarity between

different levels of the district and state administration on how migrant workers' travel home will be facilitated. Second, if such confusion forms part of a strategy to keep migrants back so there isn't a labour shortage in the



state, it impinges on the choice of migrant workers regarding where they wish to be at a time of distress.

In fact, the Supreme Court's orders issued on 9th June in the Suo Motu case on migrants has made it incumbent on states to identify migrants who want to return and organize transport for them within the next two weeks. Requests for Shramik trains if needed are to be fulfilled within 24 hours. In this light, we urge the Haryana government to streamline its communication and procedures to help migrant workers get home. This would also prevent further distress for those workers who are paying high prices to private operators to return home, in the absence of state support for the return journey.

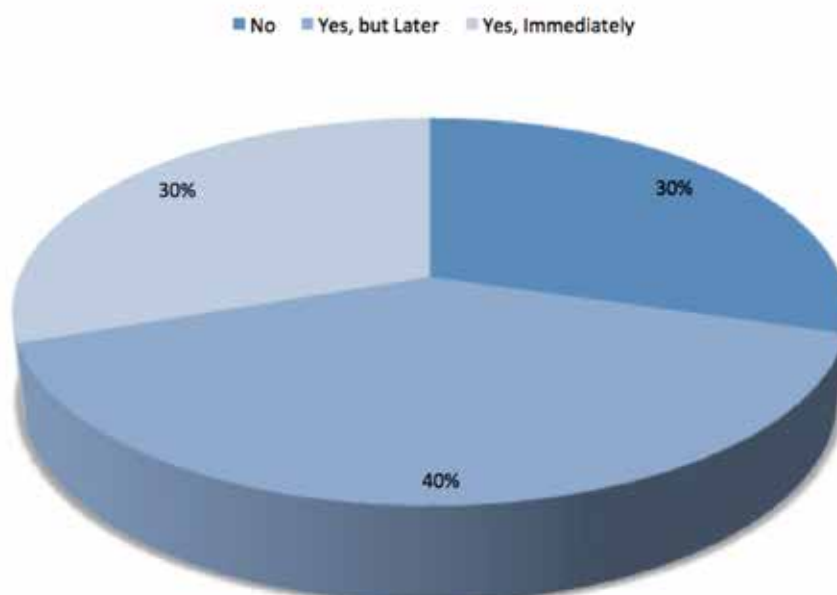


Fig 7: Intent to return (N=385)

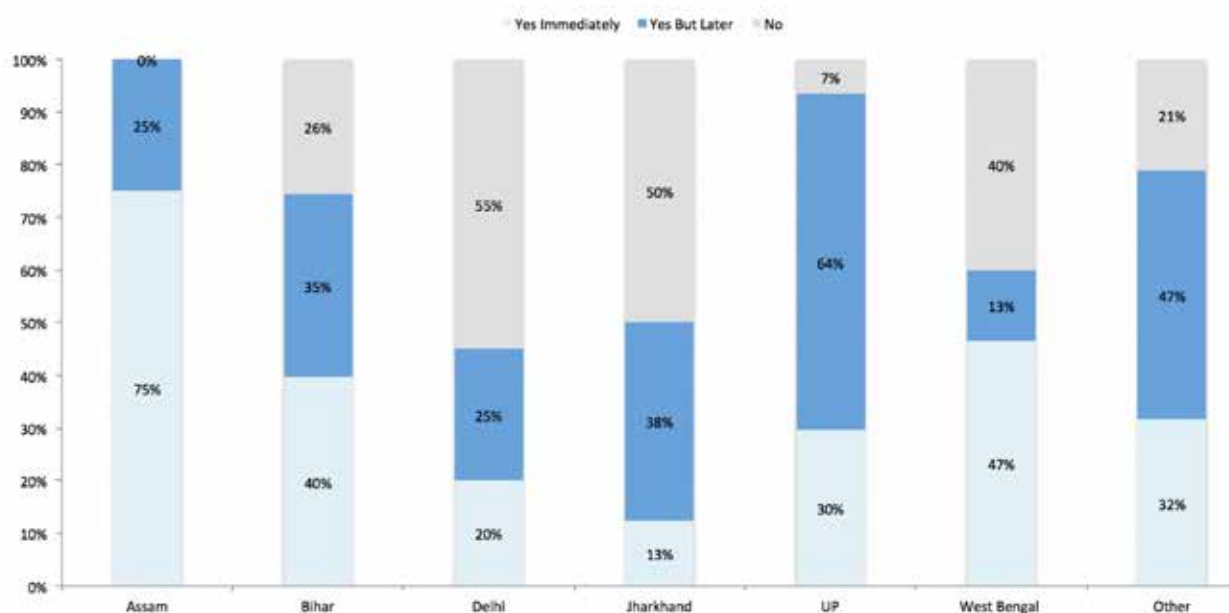


Fig 8: Intent to return, by state of origin (N=385)

*Photography by Vinay Gupta*



## About GNEM

Gurgaon Nagrik Ekta Manch (GNEM) is a citizen's platform that works towards building peace and harmony among the residents of Gurugram, a city of about 1.5 million located south of India's capital New Delhi. In the past two years, we have organised multi-faith events, provided support to communities impacted by violence and have worked towards conflict resolution whenever the need has arisen. Additionally, GNEM has played a key role in evolving and communicating a citizen charter in order to inform voters ahead of Haryana Assembly elections in 2019.

## Our COVID-19 lockdown response

Since 27 March 2020, GNEM has organised a substantive effort to raise funds for food relief to daily wagers and informal sector workers in Gurugram. Until now, the GNEM team has distributed over 25,000 household ration kits across district Gurgaon thereby providing food security to more than 100,000 people for 10 days. Each kit contains 5 kg flour, 5 kg rice, 1 kg pulses, 1 liter mustard oil, salt, haldi, jeera, bars of soap and a packet of sanitary napkins.

Additionally, we are distributing an average of 25,000 cooked meals daily at 30+ bastis & tenements across the city to feed the homeless and those migrants who do not have access to cooking facilities. So far, in partnership with public and private sector organisations, GNEM delivered more than 20 lakh meals to migrant workers and their families.

GNEM's operations are managed by a dedicated team of more than 200 volunteers, who verify every SOS call made for help, procure and package supplies, manage community kitchens, and organize the logistics of delivery in collaboration with members of the community, ensuring that hygiene standards and social distancing norms are followed.

