

# India's Policy Response to COVID-19 and the Gendered Impact on Urban Informal Workers in Delhi NCR

Study by The Quantum Hub and ICRW

## Thematic Brief **3** Policy Responses and the Impact on Food Security



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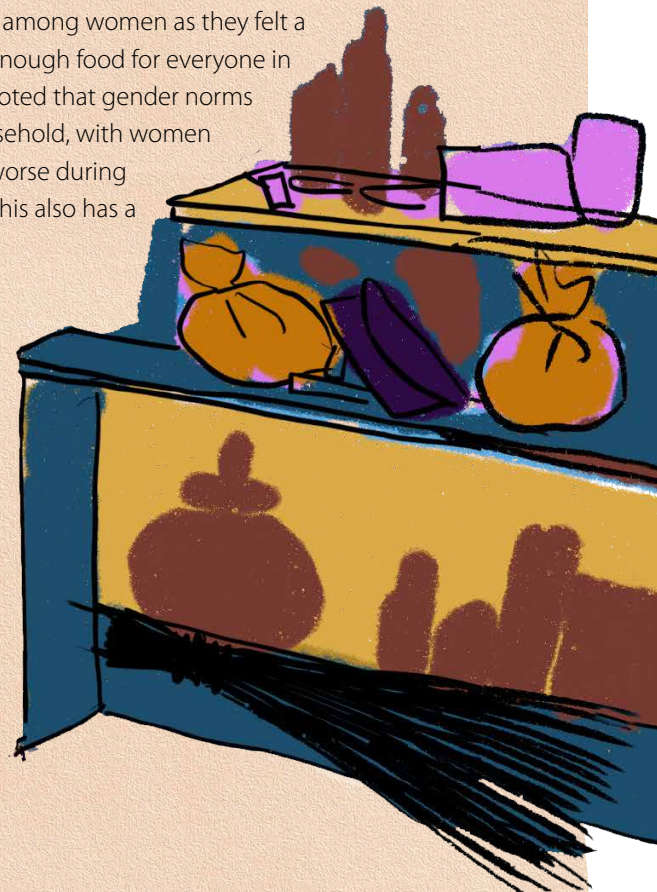
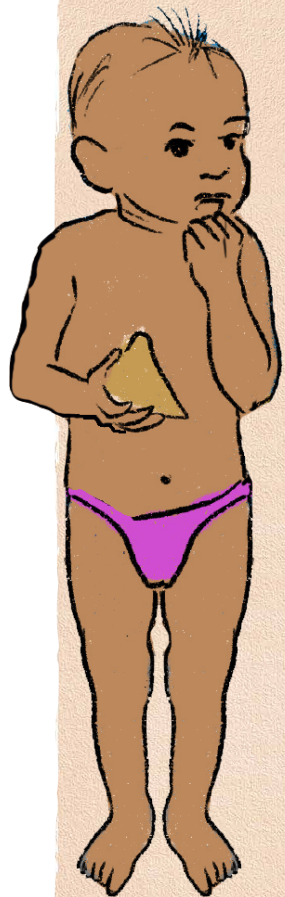
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# Food Security

The lockdown and subsequent labour exodus disrupted the supply chain of essential commodities, with grain markets being closed and oil and rice mills operating at limited strength in many cities.<sup>1</sup> This also impacted the transport of goods to wholesalers and retailers. In June 2020, the food supply situation was further complicated by a cyclone in eastern India. At this time, the Delhi government submitted in court that it had deposited money with the Food Corporation of India for release of grains, rice and other essentials, but noted that there was a “glitch in the supply chain” as ration had to be diverted by the FCI to meet the needs of states impacted by the cyclone.<sup>2</sup>

The impact was also seen in access to rations owing to loss of income, and curtailed supply chains leading to a spike in food inflation.<sup>3</sup> Researchers have also commented on the relationship between food insecurity and poor mental health of women. A researcher, who was also helping with the Hunger Helpline Centre in Delhi NCT, mentioned during a KII. There was a palpable sense of increased mental stress noticed among women as they felt a larger sense of responsibility towards ensuring there is enough food for everyone in the household. Furthermore, various studies have also noted that gender norms often play a role in the distribution of food within a household, with women often eating the least, last and which gets significantly worse during times of economic hardships and other public crises.<sup>4,5</sup> This also has a severe impact on their health and nutrition.

- 1 IANS (2020). *Coronavirus: Labourers' exodus throws supply chain, production out of gear*. Business Standard.
- 2 Delhi High Court. (June 11, 2020). *Delhi Rozi-Roti Adhikar Abhiyan vs Union Of India And Ors*
- 3 Gokhroo, S. (2021). *India's Informal Workers Under the Lockdown: A Snapshot*. Social and Political Research Foundation
- 4 Srivastava, A. (5 March, 2021). *Opinion: Why Women Eat Last And Least?* NDTV.
- 5 Oxfam. (2020). *The hunger virus: How COVID-19 is fuelling hunger in a hungry world*



## Policy Response

Against this backdrop, the Prime Minister Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) has been one of the key welfare measures by the Central government to help the poor mitigate food insecurity. As of 14 July 2021, a parliamentary reply recorded that nearly 400.703 lakh tons (against an allocated 600.814 lakh tons) of food grains were distributed across the country under the scheme over the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 period. State governments also aimed at alleviating food insecurity with several add-on schemes, including cooked food for those in need.

The Delhi government floated the Mukhya Mantri Corona Sahayta Yojana in April 2020, which bolstered Central efforts under PMGKAY, by providing an additional kit of essentials to PDS-covered families. However, through an ongoing writ petition at the time, they were instructed in June 2020 to *“ensure that food grains are distributed to the poor, needy and marginalized non-PDS residents from the PDS, as well as other distribution centers stated to be set-up by them”*<sup>6</sup>. Subsequently, over the next few months, the Delhi government also provided dry rations against e-coupons<sup>7</sup> (PTI, 2021). Other state measures in the NCR included Rajasthan’s Indira Rasoi Yojana providing subsidized cooked meals to the needy, community kitchens set up by the Uttar Pradesh government providing 12 lakh food packets a day, and Distress Ration Tokens introduced by the Haryana government for those without ration cards. After the 2nd wave, food security was also impacted by the loss of lives and breadwinners, and income support schemes discussed in the previous section aimed to address this gap.

To sum up, the Centre’s response to addressing food security issues during the pandemic was limited to the distribution of dry ration such as wheat/rice and pulses through the PDS channels, whereas several states led initiatives supplemented this by providing other essential food items through food packets or the delivery of hot cooked meals through community kitchens and shelter homes for the poor and vulnerable.



6 Quoted from the Order issued by the Delhi High Court on the Delhi Rozi-Roti Adhikar Abhiyan vs Union Of India And Ors’ case

7 Oral observations recorded in a PTI report

## Analysing Policy Responses

To study the overall impact of the policy responses to address risks of food insecurity, we have looked at two schemes - Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (Centre) and Delhi's E-coupon scheme for non-PDS beneficiaries.

Policy Response	Effectiveness	Unintended Effects	Equitable Access	Cost	Feasibility (Institutional Capacity)	Acceptance	Informal/ Alternative Mechanisms
PMGKY	-	+	-	+	+	-	+
E-coupon (Delhi)	+	-	-	0*	+	+	+

(\*: Negative impact or outcome, 0: Neutral impact or outcome; +: Positive impact or outcome; 0\*: impact varied across the 1st and 2nd wave)

### Effectiveness

Overall, reports have observed that PMGKAY had the highest coverage among all social welfare measures.<sup>8,9</sup> However, as only ration card holders were recognized as eligible beneficiaries of the scheme, several reports documented significant instances of exclusion, specifically among the urban informal workers.

A survey reported that 52% and 79% of informal workers had received free ration in the 1st and 2nd waves respectively.<sup>10</sup> To bridge the gap resulting from mis-calculation of beneficiaries,<sup>11</sup> the government announced the distribution of about 8 lakh MT food grains to be provided to about 8 crore migrant labourers under the ANB initiative, but three months later, it was reported by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution that a mere 33% of the 8 lakh tonnes of food grain (wheat and rice) had reached the beneficiaries.<sup>12</sup> Recognizing the exclusion in coverage, several state governments also introduced measures to target non-PDS beneficiaries and migrant workers, such as the Delhi government's 'E-coupon scheme for non-PDS beneficiaries' and Haryana's Distress Ration Tokens.

8 Rahul Lahoti, Rosa Abraham, Surbhi Kesar, Paaritosh Nath and Amit Basole. (2020). Compilation of Findings: Covid-19 Livelihood Survey, Azim Premji University

9 Dalberg (2021). *Impact of Covid-19 on women in low-income households in India*

10 ActionAid (2020). *Workers in the time of Covid-19: Round 1 of the National Study of Informal Workers*

11 An IndiaSpend report posits that the use of Census 2011 data by the government to calculate the number of state-wise beneficiaries under PDS would exclude over 100 million eligible people (2020). Further, migrant workers who were away from their state of domicile were also excluded.

12 State-wise data on distribution of foodgrains under PMGKAY and ANB in Annexure.



In Delhi, the E-coupon scheme has been an adequate food security net for the urban informal workers especially during the 1st wave, with about 69.6 lakh persons having been provided free dry rations. Under the ANB package, Delhi has supplied free dry rations to 4.5 lakh beneficiaries.<sup>13</sup> However, during the 2nd wave, the Delhi government put an arbitrary cap of 20 lakh non-PDS beneficiaries and was subsequently reminded by the Delhi High Court that it would be prudent to go about “*appropriately revising the number of non-PDS beneficiaries under the scheme in question*”.<sup>14</sup> During this period, a helpline run by SWAN, noted that between 25th May and 11th June, over half of the distress calls, on average, were from people who had less than a day’s ration left.<sup>15</sup>

## Unintended Effects

As reports about the exclusion of migrant workers from PDS channels grew and Right to Food campaign activists took to the courts to petition for distribution of free ration to migrant workers, SC ordered the Centre to set up a national portal for registration of unorganized sector workers by July 31, 2021 (2021). This is likely to increase the access for migrants and other unorganized workers to other social security welfare schemes as per their eligibility. With respect to the Delhi E-coupon scheme, since the state government required eligible beneficiaries to register online for the tokens, many sections of the urban informal workers were forced to pay at internet cafes and other middlemen, either in cash or by sharing a part of their ration.<sup>16</sup>



## Equitable Access

Various surveys have found that PMGKAY was one of the more accessible among all the social security measures introduced in the country since March 2020. A Dalberg study noted that of the surveyed households 90% were receiving free ration in May 2020, with states steadily improving access every week.<sup>17</sup> The same survey also found that about 70% of women depended on PDS for food and nutrition during the crisis than on any other channel. However, another survey noted an urban-rural discrepancy in access, with 91% of households receiving free grains in rural areas as compared to only 67% in urban areas.<sup>18</sup>

The poor coverage in urban areas could be attributed to two factors - exclusion of non-PDS card holders; and the potential exclusion of migrant workers as the scheme’s eligibility criteria is rooted in domicile and not place of work. A study by SWAN, based on the conversations with around 8000 migrant workers and their families, noted that 62% of the workers did not have access to ration cards in either their home states or in their current locations and 82% of the workers had two or fewer days’ worth of ration (2021).<sup>19</sup> A study conducted between March and May 2020 among non-migrant workers in Delhi’s informal

13 As mentioned in the Economic Survey of Delhi 2020-21

14 Delhi High Court. (June 25, 2021). *Delhi Rozi-Roti Adhikar Abhiyan vs Union Of India And Ors*

15 Data shared exclusively with The Quantum Hub for this study. Relevant charts enclosed in Annexure.

16 Source: KII with an expert

17 Dalberg (2021). *Impact of Covid-19 on women in low-income households in India*

18 Rahul Lahoti, Rosa Abraham, Surbhi Kesar, Paaritosh Nath and Amit Basole. (2020). *Compilation of Findings: Covid-19 Livelihood Survey*, Azim Premji University

19 Source: KII with an expert. The charges ranged from Rs 100 to Rs 150 or a cut from the ration the beneficiaries would receive through the e-coupons.

settlements found that 34% of the respondents accessed the 500 food assistance centres set up by the Delhi government and 46% received government assistance, primarily in the form of food.<sup>20</sup> Reportedly, during the 2nd lockdown, Anganwadis in Delhi NCT saw a 46% increase in enrolment by women and children, primarily as a means to access dry ration and other nutritional supplements being distributed through the ICDS program.<sup>21</sup>

To address the issue concerning domicile status in PDS, the Union government requested states and UTs to expedite their work on implementing the One Nation One Ration Card scheme (ONORC) which allows a PDS card holder to access ration from any state, irrespective of their domicile. ONORC has seen varying impact in different states with reports citing various factors which have hindered its rollout.<sup>22</sup> According to reports, Delhi is among the best performing states,<sup>23</sup> with over 56,000 cardholders benefiting from the scheme in July and August, followed by Haryana.<sup>24</sup>

## Cost

In March 2020, the PMGKAY scheme was announced as a part of the larger Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, with a total allocation of Rs 1.70 lakh crore and as the scheme was extended in 2021, an additional Rs 93,868 crores were allocated exclusively for PMGKAY. While there have been some gaps in the delivery of this scheme, the total budgetary allocation does not appear to have been a contributing factor.

For the Delhi government's E-coupon scheme, information on the total budget outlay of this scheme has been difficult to source. However, as mentioned earlier, under this scheme, the Delhi government was able to supply dry ration to nearly 70 lakh beneficiaries. During the 2nd wave, however, the state government has been challenged in the Delhi High Court for putting an arbitrary limit of 20 lakh beneficiaries under the scheme in 2021.

## Institutional Capacity

An analysis of institutions from both formal actors such as Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, state government- CM's office, Director of Education (for distribution of ration), judiciary, elected representatives, police, anganwadi workers, schools as well as informal actors including CSOs, fundraising organisations, religious communities, volunteers (political/apolitical), vigilante groups, cyber cafes, citizen-led initiatives was done.

20 Lee, K., Sahai, H., Baylis, P., & Greenstone, M. (2020). *Job loss and behavioral change: the unprecedented effects of the India lockdown in Delhi*. University of Chicago, Becker Friedman Institute for Economics.

21 Goswami, S & Iftikhar, F. (6 June, 2021). *46% more children, women enrol in Delhi's anganwadis amid second lockdown*. Hindustan Times.

22 Sinha, D. (2021). *SC Order Towards Making 'Food For All' A Reality*. Outlook India.

Sirur, S. (2020) *The 'dictatorial republic' of RWAs — the other big problem Covid created for India*. The Print

23 Dash, D. (29 Aug, 2021). *With 29,000 transactions, Delhi tops in ration offtake by migrants from other states/UTs*. Times of India

24 Mishra, A. (7 Sep, 2021). *Over 56,000 get ration under OONORC scheme in Delhi*. Times of India

As a system that has been in existence for several years, the PDS centres have integrated well with the local ecosystem, which have ensured high levels of accessibility.<sup>25</sup> Several studies observed that a majority of the population was able to access free rations during the lockdown and the institutional mechanisms for delivery of rations appear to have been functioning well, with few recorded instances of irregularity in the Delhi NCR. The gaps in the implementation of PMGKAY were primarily due to errors in targeting and gaps in policy design as documented by studies. Overall, the institutional structures put in place for the implementation, per se, seem to have performed relatively well.

The distribution of ration under the Delhi E-coupon scheme was implemented through approximately 550<sup>26</sup> 'Designated Distribution Centres', and the persons in charge for the distribution were the staff of Directorate of Education, Municipal Corporations and other government departments.<sup>27</sup> Schools were also included as DDCs and teachers were roped in to help with the ration distribution. This mode of delivery was found to be effective in reaching out to a large number of beneficiaries, especially during the 1st wave.

## Acceptability

Considering the significant rates of exclusion under PMGKAY, Right to Food campaign activists have been campaigning for the universalization of PDS during the pandemic, with the understanding that only those in dire need of free rations would stand in queues for the same. Notwithstanding these exclusions, even among those who received the ration through PMGKAY, i.e. 42% of households who had received at least some free rations and 29% who had received the full 10 kg quota reported that their consumption was still below pre-pandemic levels as of November 2020.<sup>28</sup>

## Relevant Informal / Alternative Mechanism

Efforts to address food security, especially among the urban poor and migrant workers was a wide-spread endeavour by several CSOs; many of which also worked in close coordination with local government bodies. A study on the response of CSOs during COVID-19 noted that 73% of the CSOs conducted immediate relief measures following the lockdown by distributing food, water and dry rations and 64 % of CSOs had started helpline facilities.<sup>29</sup> During phase 1 of the lockdown, the Centre had submitted to the SC that 30.11 lakh people had been fed by NGOs with 13 states outperforming state-led measures for ensuring food security. Citizen-led initiatives were also common during both the waves, with individuals helping deliver food to quarantined households, elderly and the disabled among others. Gurudwaras also played a critical role in serving COVID patients in Delhi

25 Detailed breakup of the number of PDS centres per district and the number of AAY and PHH card beneficiaries included in Annexure.

26 Source for the number of DDCs is a media article from LiveMint

27 Guidelines for the e-coupon scheme by the Government of Delhi

28 Rahul Lahoti, Rosa Abraham, Surbhi Kesar, Paaritosh Nath and Amit Basole. (2020). Compilation of Findings: Covid-19 Livelihood Survey, Azim Premji University

29 Participatory Research in Asia. (2020). *Response of Indian Civil Society towards COVID-19*







NCR with cooked food during the pandemic. During the 2nd wave, especially in the NCR, their efforts were primarily directed towards finding hospital beds, oxygen cylinders and other such immediate healthcare needs as unlike the 1st wave, the number of infections in the 2nd wave were much higher. Also, with volunteers themselves falling sick and losing family members to COVID, it was difficult to find enough on-ground capacity for doorstep delivery of ration and food.<sup>30</sup>

*Among all the relief and recovery measures announced since March 2020, food security measures have been found to be most impactful for the urban poor. Even though it has left a sizable population of informal workers, particularly migrants out of its ambit, the directives issued by the Supreme Court is likely to bring about positive, long-term change in addressing their food insecurity. One of the largest criticisms against the food security measures have been the disregard for universalization of PDS during a public crisis and the need for rethinking what counts as essential items to meet a household's nutritional needs.*

## Recommendations

- a. Universalizing access to PDS during lockdowns and for a month after the lockdowns are lifted.
- b. Providing either cash or including other essential items such as cooking fuel, oil, salt and spices in the ration kit.
- c. Running campaigns to increase enrolment of young or expecting mothers in Anganwadi centres.
- d. Facilitating ties between public schools and CSOs for the distribution of cooked food on a wide scale.
- e. Expediting the implementation of the One Nation One Ration Card scheme.
- f. Setting up registration booths or kiosks outside the Designated Distribution Centres for registrations of the E-coupon schemes to overcome the digital divide, both in terms of access and literacy. The Delhi government could consider giving priority to schools and Anganwadi centres as they are more accessible to women.

30 Source: KII with an expert