

Plight of Factory Workers during the Time of COVID-19 Lockdown: A Review

Devika Agrawal¹, Dr. Nimmi Singh²

¹Public Health Professional

²Associate Professor; Department of Dentistry (OMR), IGIMS, Patna, Bihar, India (Corresponding author)

Abstract: *The coronavirus outbreak has led to many disruptions all over the world. With crippling economies, to the overwhelming pressure on healthcare systems, it has also put millions out of a job. Due to the crisis, factory labour and workers are one of the most affected. Unemployment has caused many such workers to starve for days, while thousands were stranded without shelter. In light of the pandemic, healthcare workers have been the most important pillars of safeguarding the lives of people from this contagious virus.*

Keywords: COVID-19, laborer, lockdown, factory workers

1. Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. [1] It was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March, 2020. [2] Globally, there have been 73,55,981 confirmed cases of COVID-19 including 4,16, 891 deaths as of June 12, 2020. [3] This pandemic has not only affected the health and wellbeing of millions, but has also resulted in various other disruptions. The reality has been grim for daily wage earners and factory workers in the last 6 months. From losing jobs to being displaced, thousands of livelihoods across the world have been threatened.

India's 93% of workforce constitutes of the unorganized sector. While labourers and factory workers earn just enough to sustain a livelihood in usual circumstances, this pandemic has made matters worse. According to The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), unemployment increased by 14.8% in the month of April. [4] Factory workers and daily wage workers have been a part of both, the organised as well as the unorganised sector in India. Thus, provision for their health and wellbeing should be at the forefront of the government's agendas. Efforts such as distribution of ration, and monetary compensation only serve a partial purpose. A large amount of distress is also suffered due to lack of relevant information to tackle the problem, uncertainty about the future, displacement due to mass unemployment, and a lack of purpose for an unspecified duration. The persistent disruption of livelihood also causes major mental distress. Apart from this, factory workers usually depend on small incentives that act as savings, which too, are hugely compromised at this time.

"Factory" means any premises including the precincts thereof- whereon ten or more workers are working, or were working on any day of the preceding. "Worker" means a person, employed, whether for remuneration or not, in any manufacturing process, or in cleaning any part of the machinery or premises used, in any other kind of work incidental to, or connected with, the manufacturing process. [5]

Relaxation of Labour Laws in India

The harsh reality of the economic crisis looming over the country was brought about well before the third phase of the lockdown. In March 2020, the changes in the labour laws came about in light of restarting the economic activities post the three-phased coronavirus lockdown. In India, there are over 200 state laws and close to 50 central laws pertaining to workers and labourers. The main objectives of the Factories Act, 1948 is to ensure adequate safety measures; to promote health and welfare of the workers employed in factories as well as to prevent haphazard growth of factories. One of the changes in the labour laws due to this pandemic has allowed industries in states like Uttar Pradesh, and Gujarat, to increase the number of working hours by up to 50% without having to pay for the additional hours of labour. Thus, workers can now be made to work for 72 hours a week or 12 hours a day as compared to the earlier 48 hours a week or 8 hours a day. Following this, other states like Odisha, Maharashtra and Goa also increased the daily hours of work. [6] Uttar Pradesh went a step further to suspend the operation of all labour laws for a period of 3 years. The exception of Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976; Employees' Compensation Act, 1923, the Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996 and provisions in the labour laws relating to women and children are applicable. One of the implications of this is that manufacturing units can choose to pay no more than the minimum wage to factory workers in these three years. In addition, Madhya Pradesh has exempted all factories from the provisions of the Factories Act, 1948 that regulate work hours. [7]

Plight of Factory Workers during the COVID-19 lockdown

The Coronavirus pandemic has not only taken away jobs, uprooted homes, lead to starvation, especially during the initial phase of the lockdown, but it has destroyed livelihoods of thousands of people. With no job security, workers had been left unpaid, and unheard. Factory workers who are working overtime now, did not have the means to earn then. While some relied on earlier savings, others faced harsher realities of acute starvation.

The lack of relevant information is another cause of distress. Families and individuals who do not have access to important and relevant information often remain in the dark for days about the emerging reality around them. This information is crucial during a crisis as it helps individuals to formulate solutions, and take the steps that could potentially be life-saving.

In such times, healthcare workers have been at the forefront of this battle. They have tirelessly been providing their services to everyone in need, working long hours, dealing with the limitations of the healthcare system, and the risk of carrying the disease to their home.^{i,ii}

Relief Measures

The Periodic Labour Force Survey 2018 had estimated that India had a workforce of about 471.5 million, out of which 114.2 million received daily wages or salaries on a casual basis. Additionally, 115 million were casual workers. As per the EPF rules, an employee and an employer contribute 12% each of the monthly salary into the EPF account. According to the new EPF account rules, the government is allowing withdrawal of 75% of the credit standing in the EPF account or 3 month's salary, whichever is lower, on account of loss of job. For workers who are daily wage earners and do not have an EPF account, will receive Rs. 500 every month for a fixed duration in their zero balance account. While some receive this amount, there are still many out there who are left out and do not receive any such benefit.

Healthcare workers across the world have been the pillars in fighting the contagious disease. Doctors from different fields have been put through these trying times, with their psychological and physical health being at stake, and yet, their firm resilience, through these times has been integral^{v11}.

2. Conclusion

It has been established that the worst is not over yet. With the current relaxations in labour laws and prevailing unemployment, the plight of factory workers remains unfortunate. During this time, the government, along with non-for-profit organisations have made consistent efforts to ensure that ration is available to all. But, with no income, paying other expenses like rent and electricity bills becomes harder. Even so, many workers have fled to their villages and homes. But this does not guarantee a secure livelihood, or even a future.

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