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

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Thematic Brief 1

Pandemic and the Urban Governance Structures

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Pandemic and Urban Governance Structures

The report published by Center for Policy Research on urban governance during the pandemic[1] looked at the jurisdictional coverage of various actors in the ecosystem in certain regions in the country, including Delhi, pointing out the need for resilient infrastructures and greater authority for local governance. It also highlighted the disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations like street vendors and migrant workers, delineating the need for special provisions addressing current and future challenges. The pandemic changed the contours of service delivery across the country, with structures rearranging themselves for an unprecedented crisis response.

This section details a few key actors that played a role in the deployment of the Delhi NCR's COVID-19 responses.

1   Dasgupta, S., et al. (2021) *Re FORM: Lessons for Urban Governance futures from the Pandemic.* CPR Research Report. New Delhi: Centre for Policy Research.

A. State Actors

Central Government

Apart from the drafting of policies and making budgetary allocations through the Finance Ministry at the Central level, inter-Ministry convergence was also a key area of work during the crisis. For example, the Parliamentary Committee on Health And Family Welfare highlighted Central Government level convergence among the Ministries of Health, Women and Child Development, Education, Rural Development, Panchayati Raj and others for food distribution. This was reportedly done in addition to the existing Public Distribution System (PDS) channels under the ambit of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution. The same report also raised concerns about the lack of data on the urban poor under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), recommending a National Database of vulnerable sections of society so that in similar crises, their needs can be addressed.
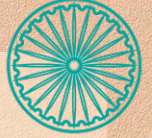
State Governments

In June 2020, there were reports of the Ministry of Home Affairs favouring a unified COVID-19 strategy for the Delhi NCR, and a similar nudge from the Supreme Court to initiate a consistent policy for the region. There was, thus, an institutional recognition of a need to maintain inter-state cooperation during this time. Even prior to these nudges, however, the state governments of Haryana, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh began coordination around migrant workers' journeys home.[2] State governments were also key to the disbursal of facilities for residents more generally, with numerous committees set up in each of the states under different thematic areas, and district collectors taking charge of pandemic response at the state governance level.[3] An important avenue for deployment of services for women was that of Anganwadis, with the Delhi Government reporting that there was a 46% increase in enrolment of women in Anganwadi centres during the pandemic, with a priority on "additional relief, ration, health supplies, raising awareness on vaccine and other issues related to COVID-19," as per state government officials.[4] Similarly, in the Sonepat district in Haryana (part of the NCR), Anganwadis continued arranging for items like take home rations, routine immunizations, and even ambulances and hospital admittances.[5] Delhi Government schools were similarly turned into temporary shelters during the first lockdown, providing food and shelter in 569 schools, as per the reports.[6]

2   Goswami, S., Khandelwal P., Dhankhar, L. & Mishra, A. (2020) *States unite to see off migrants*. Hindustan Times
3   Farooqui, MH. & Malhotra, S. (2020) *Role of the District Collector (District Magistrate or Deputy Commissioner) in the COVID-19 Response*. Center for Policy Research.
4   Goswami, S & Iftikhar, F. (6 June, 2021). *46% more children, women enrol in Delhi's anganwadis amid second lockdown*. Hindustan Times.
5   Kumar, K. & Roy, S. (4 May 2021) *Residents, RWAs pool resources to overcome shortage of beds, medicines, O2*. Hindustan Times.
6   Chand, S. & Mishra, AKN. (2020). *Delhi schools become temporary homes*. Times of India.

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Urban Local Bodies (ULBs)

ULBs provided the third level of governance, coordinating with state governments to deploy services for residents. The Central Ministry of Health & Family Welfare issued guidelines to ULBs, highlighting the focus areas for their work.[7] While in certain states ULBs provided services like door-to-door food delivery, there were also instances during the pandemic, where existing tensions between levels of governance worsened. In Delhi, for instance, there emerged reports of a clash between the state government and municipal bodies over payment of salaries, which were dealt with judicially.[8]

Judiciary

During the successive waves of the pandemic, the Judiciary (at every level) proved to be a key player in the urban governance structure, providing instructions to both central and state governments, and responding to the petitions and pleas from citizens across the country on issues ranging from oxygen availability[9] to PDS distribution[10] to rent payments.[11] Still, there has been much debate about what more could have been done, particularly for migrant workers, through judicial orders[12] *(Maqbool et. al, 2020)*.

Police

During this time, the police became a port of call for many, with Delhi Police PCR vans reportedly turning into delivery centres for women who were en-route to hospitals in the city. Many women turned to the police when ambulance services were inundated and 997 pregnant women were taken to hospitals by the Delhi Police, with police staff providing necessary support and medical assistance despite being untrained in this regard.[13] The Delhi Police reportedly also delivered five million food packets to homeless people in the city by April 2020. In still other cases, the police continued its patrol, despite large numbers of their own being infected with COVID-19 during the second wave. The Gurugram police, similarly, was involved in last mile delivery of services during the second wave, even delivering medicines to patients at home. Despite this, however, according to stakeholders in the NGO space, many migrant workers remained fearful of approaching the police across the country, for fear of being turned away in non-medical instances.[14] A survey conducted by the Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiative corroborated this dichotomy in responses, suggesting that while sometimes police personnel were unhelpful, in other instances, they intervened by providing transport, speaking to the abusers.[15]

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7   Guidelines issued on 16.05.2020. Available at: https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/PreparednessandresponsetoCOVID19inUrbansettlements.pdf
8   Oral observations recorded in a PTI report.
9   WP(C) No. 3031/2020, Supreme Court of India
10 Delhi Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan v. Union of India & Ors., Delhi High Court
11 W.P.(C) 8956/2020, Delhi High Court
13 ANI (2021). *9 women who gave birth in PCR vans during lockdown to be honoured on Women's Day.* ANI News
14 Source: KII with expert
15 Kapoor (2021) references the AALI_Rapid Survey_VAW Factsheet, which makes use of this survey data. Available at:
    https://www.facebook.com/384350311621679/posts/3038324946224189/?d=n.

Indian Military

In Delhi, during the second wave, the state government also requested that the Army be deployed, even as the existing institutional machinery struggled to keep up with the health requirements of patients across the city.[16] The Indian military stepped into the fray not just in Delhi, but also across the country.[17]

Elected Representatives

At various levels, elected representatives took on the mantle of arranging the essentials. In the first wave, Delhi government MLAs used social media to arrange for donations of food supplies and other essentials.[18] In the second wave too, MPs took on this work in their personal capacities, activating their networks and capillary channels. There were also reported instances of elected representatives being accused of hoarding medicines.[19]

Healthcare Workers (HCWs)

Across the pandemic waves, existing frontline institutional workers like ASHA workers remained the backbone of institutional health responses, despite their institutional status being "voluntary." However, multiple protests about salaries brought their plight to the fore.[20] In some states in the NCR, like Delhi, further initiatives were taken in June 2021 — such as the one to train young people to take on non-medical roles like ward attendants and cleaners in hospitals during a potential third wave. In many instances, pro-bono telemedicine services were set up through state government orders.
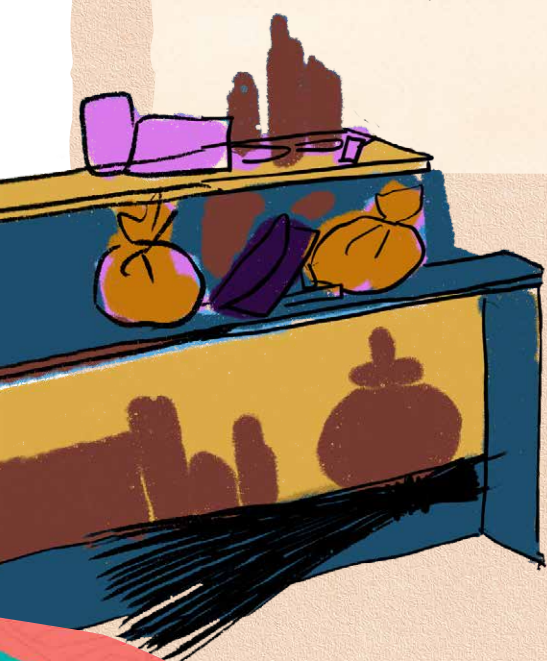
16 BBC (3 May 2021) *India Covid pandemic: Delhi calls for army help amid crisis.* British Broadcasting Corporation.
17 Siddiqui, H. (2021) *Global aid, Indian Armed Forces help in fighting COVID -19.* Financial Express
18 Kalkaji MLA Atishi Singh's Instagram featured ways in which individuals could help. See here: https://www.instagram.com/p/B-MvQ4hJ_uX/?utm_medium=copy_link
19 India Today (22 April 2021) *Gautam Gambhir on sticky wicket after offering free Fabiflu amid shortage of Covid drugs.* India Today Web Desk.
20 Ghosh, Somrita (29 March 2021). *One year of COVID-19 outbreak: How Delhi's female healthcare workers overcame obstacles to control pandemic situation.* The New Indian Express

B. Non-State Actors

Civil Society Organizations

While not strictly being a part of the urban governance mechanism, civil society played a critical role in the overall management of the crisis. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) that responded to the Covid crisis response during this time ranged from NGOs to workers' associations to community-based organizations, to even citizen led collectives. Invest India published a list of some initiatives started by entities ranging from NGOs to corporate entities. The Parliamentary Standing Committee report referenced earlier in this section also highlighted the role of CSOs around awareness generation and distribution of food commodities. Apart from this, however, CSOs also helped migrant workers navigate services such as online registrations for rations and for Shramik trains.[21] A learning from these interventions was that the digital divide plagued the implementation of many policy measures (both central and state) for lower income communities.

Residents Welfare Associations (RWAs)

In many cases, RWAs jumped into the thick of things, but reports both commended their role in pandemic firefighting[22] as well as criticised controversial orders such as those related to domestic workers and the number of homes they could work in.[23] In Gurugram, RWAs even joined hands with residents during the second wave, pooling resources to mitigate the crisis.[24] Typically, in India, RWAs are voluntary organizations that fall under the ambit of the Societies Registration Act, 1860. While the National Centre for Disease Control also released an advisory for RWAs during this time, there was no specific focus on domestic workers, apart from a cursory note to ensure that they had access to soap and frequent handwashing.

Other Political Actors

Unelected political actors, like the Opposition BJP in Delhi, also undertook to provision of supplies to those in need during the first 1st wave. During the 2nd wave, youth wings of political parties, including the Indian Youth Congress and the BJP Yuva Morcha, were deployed on the ground, reaching out to assist millions impacted by the health crisis.[25]

21   Source: KII with expert.
22   Dey, A. (2021). *Resident bodies help govt implement Covid measures as cases surge.* Hindustan Times
23   Sirur, S. (2020) *The 'dictatorial republic' of RWAs — the other big problem Covid created for India.* The Print.
24   Kumar, K. & Roy, S. (4 May 2021) *Residents, RWAs pool resources to overcome shortage of beds, medicines, O2.* Hindustan Times.
25   Chatterji, S. & Arora, M. (2021). *Political parties lend a helping hand amid Covid-19 crisis.* Hindustan Times.