

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

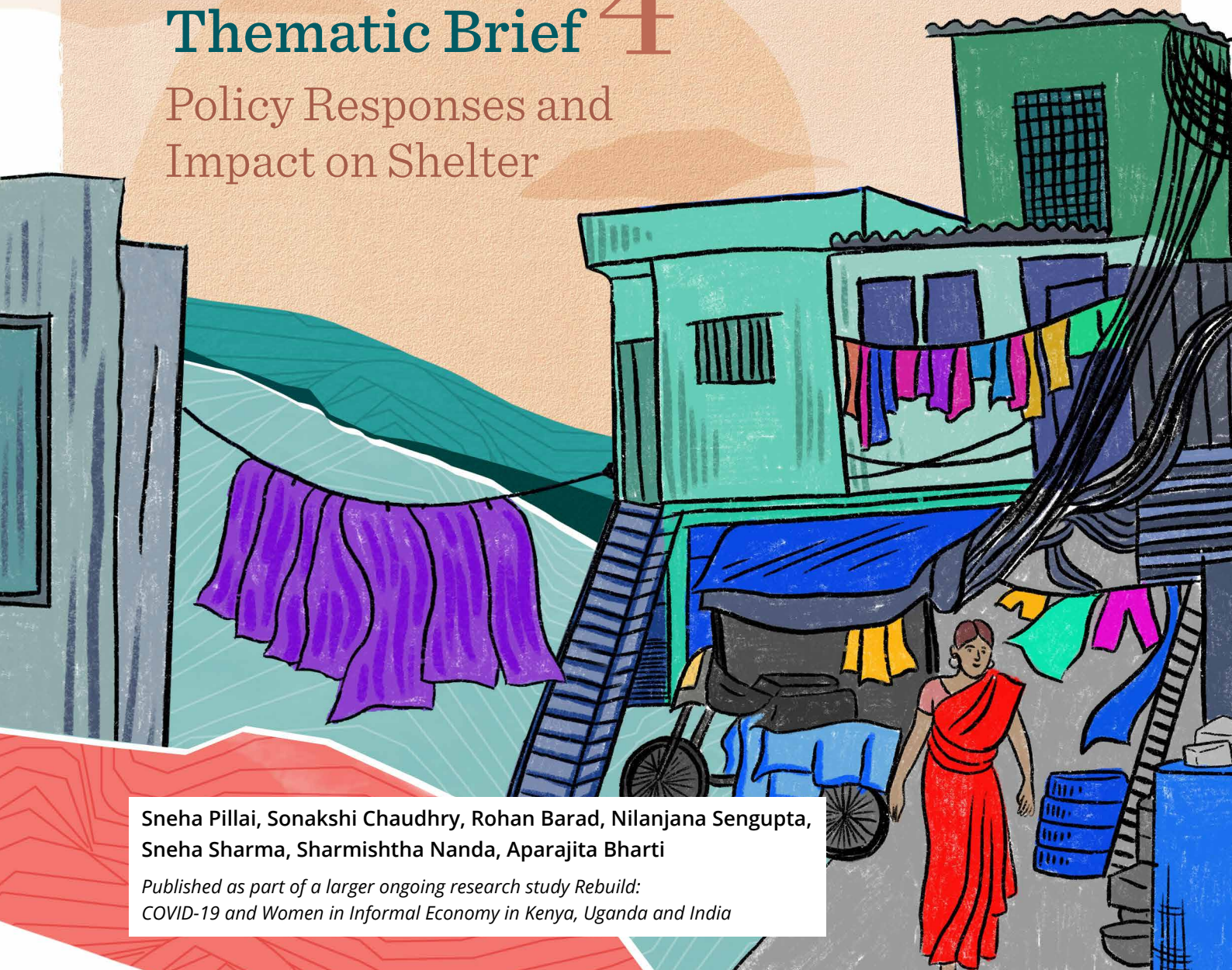
Study by The Quantum Hub and ICRW

## Thematic Brief 4

Policy Responses and  
Impact on Shelter

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# Shelter

In the underbelly of India's metro cities, urban informal workers have always had poor access to safe and affordable shelter. With COVID infections rising in the cities, informal workers struggled to make rents due to loss of income, ensuing the trigger of a large scale reverse migration. According to an expert during a KII, newspapers would not have been flooded with images of returning migrants if they had an option of safe and dignified housing in the cities they were helping build. It also showed how little the policymakers understood and accounted for the intersectional realities of informal work, migration, poverty, and insecure housing for millions of these workers.

It was suggested that close to 60 million migrants moved back to their states, shocking the economic system of the country with low labour availability.<sup>1</sup> Despite directives<sup>2</sup> from the government to landlords not to ask for rent for the period of lockdown, there were many cases of violation as the landlords also depend on rents as their sole source of income in several cases.<sup>3</sup> Some of the employed women workers also had to quit and leave with their family to native places, as men lost their jobs.<sup>4</sup> This may be indicative of the inability of the family to sustain on a single income or the value assigned to women's work.

- 1 Mishra, A. (7 Sep, 2021). *Over 56,000 get ration under OONORC scheme in Delhi*. Times of India
- 2 Directives from various Secretaries in the Ministry of Labour, Home Affairs etc. During the first wave
- 3 Source: KII with an expert
- 4 Abdul Azeez E P, Dandub Palzor Negi, Asha Rani & Senthil Kumar A P. (2021). *The impact of COVID-19 on migrant women workers in India*, Eurasian Geography and Economics.



## Policy Response

Despite the scale of this crisis, the immediate policy response to address the need for safe shelter was limited to temporary shelters (in schools, community halls and other civil society-run shelters under the State/UT Initiatives of Shelter PMAY (URBAN)<sup>5</sup> provided by states. As it became clear that the workers were intent on leaving the cities behind, the government began to arrange special trains such as the Shramik Express and other forms of transport for the workers.<sup>6</sup> Later, towards the end of July 2020, the government launched a sub scheme of PMAY-U - Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHCs) - under the Rs 20 crore relief package, Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan, for addressing the rental housing needs of urban migrants/poor. This scheme, however, continues to be under development.

Four days after India went into a country-wide lockdown, MHA issued a circular<sup>7</sup> directing the state governments to accommodate migrant workers in nearby shelters/camps and provide them with basic amenities like food, clean drinking water, and medicines in the shelter homes. Later in response to a writ petition,<sup>8</sup> the Supreme Court had noted that this had led to the setting up of over 21,000 relief camps housing around 6,60,291 workers. The circular also directed landlords to not demand rent for one month and threatened action under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 against those evicting labourers from rented accommodations.

The biggest challenge in the management of this crisis was the lack of robust data on internal migration, since most of these migrant workers were unregistered and therefore invisible on government databases. In response, the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) started collecting and registering information on migrant workers; it had registered over 6.5 lakh<sup>9</sup> persons by July 2020. However, over a year later, the pace of registrations was sluggish across various states. Eventually, in June 2021, the Supreme Court directed<sup>10</sup> all states to expedite registrations of unorganized workers on a National Database for the Unorganized Workers (NDUW) under the Ministry of Labour and Employment, to ensure migrant workers have access to different welfare schemes of the Central and the State governments.

5 As mentioned on the PMAY-U dashboard under state initiatives during covid

6 Oral observations recorded in a PTI report.

7 The circular refers to order no. 40-3/2020-DM-I (A) by the Ministry of Home Affairs

8 Supreme Court record of proceeding on Alakh Alok Srivastava Vs Union of India

9 As reported in the writ order of the Supreme Court: SUO MOTU WRIT PETITION (CIVIL) No(s).6/2020

10 As recorded in the writ petition in the Bandhua Mukti Morcha Vs Union of India and Ors.





In June 2020, the Union Cabinet gave its approval for developing AHRCs, the only Centre-led policy measure, to ensure housing and shelter needs for the urban poor.<sup>11</sup> The Commerce Minister said that over 70,000 government-funded houses were available to be let out to the migrants as of July 10, 2020.<sup>12</sup> The PMAY-U scheme also had a number of other migrant-focused initiatives in different states.

As part of state-led efforts, all states in NCR set up shelter homes, depending on whether the states were seeing inward or outward movement, mostly with help from CSOs. For instance, Haryana's 'Shelter for Migrants during lockdown period'<sup>13</sup> provided cooked food and other necessities at night shelters for migrants travelling back home, the Delhi NCT saw more initiatives directed towards providing shelter to stranded workers and homeless population, and Uttar Pradesh worked on providing temporary quarantine shelters with medical screening for the migrants returning home.<sup>14</sup> In Delhi NCT, as of 26th August 2021, the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board<sup>15</sup> (DUSIB) was running 209 shelters (including temporary shelters and isolation centres) with the capacity to accommodate 17,851 individuals.

## Analysing Policy Responses

To analyse the impact of insecure housing, shelter policies and its need, we mainly look at the Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) as a sub scheme under PMAY-U and Shelter Homes in Delhi NCR.

Policy Response	Effectiveness	Unintended effects	Equitable access	Cost	Feasibility (institutional capacity)	Acceptance	Informal/ alternative mechanisms
DUSIB Shelters	-	0	-	+	-	-	+
ARHC	-	+	-	-	-	-	-

(Key: '-': Negative impact or outcome; '0': Neutral impact or outcome; '+': Positive impact or outcome)

11 Dutta, A. (2020). Cabinet approves rental housing scheme for migrants, govt to spend Rs 600 crore. Hindustan Times.

12 Sharma, S. (July 10, 2020). Housing relief for migrant workers; thousands of PMAY houses ready to move-in: Piyush Goyal. Financial Express.

13 As mentioned on the PMAY-U website under Shelter for Migrants during lockdown period

14 Ahmad, F. (April 1, 2020). Over 3,000 Shelter Homes with Screening Facilities Set Up for Migrant Workers in UP: Chief Secy. News18.

15 As per the DUSIB night shelters tracker



## Effectiveness

The ARHCs aim to benefit 2.95 lakh individuals.<sup>16</sup> The scheme is to be implemented through two models: first, utilizing existing government-funded vacant houses to convert into ARHCs through public-private partnerships or by public agencies ; second, the construction, operation and maintenance of ARHCs by public/ private entities on their own vacant land. Under the first model , the ARHC portal states that Delhi possesses 29,112 available houses, Rajasthan 4,884 houses, and Haryana and Uttar Pradesh 2,545 and 5,232 government-funded houses<sup>17</sup> respectively. However, the portal, as of August 2021, did not reflect any data against the number of houses already allotted in NCR states, which might indicate that the scheme is yet to be operational in NCR. A Standing Committee report<sup>18</sup> noted that 22 states had signed the Memorandum of Agreement to implement the scheme.

KIs with experts also pointed to the fact that the ARHC was envisioned more as a long-term measure. A statement reflected in the report by the Parliament Standing Committee on Labour mentions “...it is apparent that ARHC complexes may not be provided to the migrant labourers immediately. However, once the scheme is implemented in right earnest and spirit, the migrant labour would be provided with the much-needed housing facility at their workplace.”

Several KIs with experts highlighted the ineffectiveness of Delhi shelter homes for migrants as the 209 DUSIB night shelters were already housing a large number of homeless and daily wage workers, whose numbers far exceeded the capacity. Furthermore, as per the dashboard, the total capacity of these shelter homes has been revised from 17,851 to 7,142 individuals, perhaps to keep social distancing norms in check.

The KIs also highlighted the overlap of roles between the centre and state agencies like DDA and DUSIB in providing shelter. It became challenging for beneficiaries due to differential requirements of documentation that caused a policy paralysis in many situations.

## Unintended Effects

The pandemic made governments and agencies realise the insecurities among migrant informal workers and their access to housing. Various studies analysed long-term affordable plans for migrant workers and stated that the ARHC scheme should hold consultations with low-income groups and informal workers to understand their ability to pay. It also suggested having international standards of ‘adequacy’ in all housing complexes among other recommendations.<sup>19</sup> As housing for migrants emerged as a key topic for discourse, Kerala’s Migrant Workers’ Hostel was highlighted as a model and is now gradually being picked up in other states as well.<sup>20</sup> Within the NCR, Greater Noida under the Gautam Budh Nagar district of UP has also announced plans to build a Shramik Hostel and a permanent night shelter.<sup>21</sup>



16 As quoted by Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs press release dated September 16, 2020

17 Data as mentioned on ARHC portal by Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs

18 Sixteenth report by the Standing Committee on Labour

19 Housing and Land Rights Network (2020) *In Search of Home: A Study on Migrant Workers' Access to Housing and Land*

20 Peter, B., Sanghvi, S. & Narendran, V. (2020) *Inclusion of Interstate Migrant Workers in Kerala and Lessons for India*. Ind. J. Labour Econ.

21 Sinha, M. (August 23, 2021). Gr Noida to set up hostel for migrant workers & permanent night shelter. Times of India.



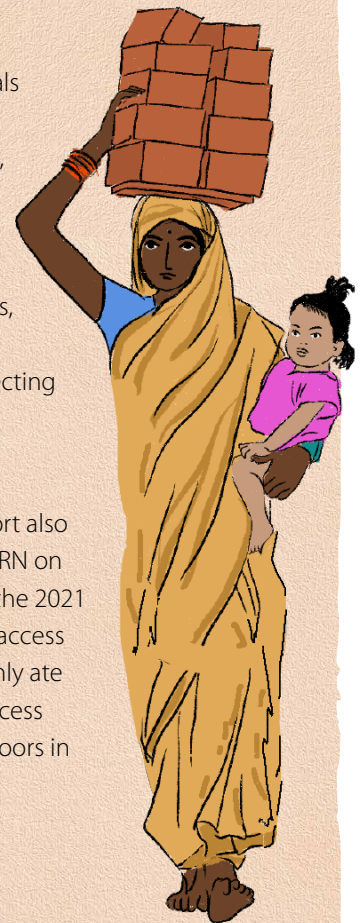
## Equitable Access

One of the main criticisms against the ARHC policy design was the lack of distinct categorization of migrant workers as a separate priority group for housing. Instead, they were broadly covered under the economically weaker section (EWS) and low-income group (LIG) segment. Similarly, the scheme states a preference for those from SC, ST, other backward castes (OBC), working women and widows, differently abled and minority backgrounds, but it does not have explicit provisions to ensure such targeting.<sup>22</sup>

While the report by the Standing Committee on Labour did not recommend the creation of a separate category, it did make a suggestion to MoHUA to accord priority to migrant workers and labourers under the scheme. Whether it would lead to tangible outcomes for the migrant population remains to be studied and documented. A recent study also noted that the vulnerable informal sector workers, especially migrants, are likely to “remain excluded,” not benefiting from the ARHC scheme, since it adopted a “profit-oriented model” more likely to cater to salaried and formal workers.<sup>23</sup>

A study of migrant workers who had returned to their villages from Delhi NCT during the lockdown found that despite directives from the Central government and repeated appeals from the Government of Delhi not to harass tenants and to postpone rent collection for a month, almost 16% of the study participants said they were harassed by landlords for rent, while about 12% of the respondents cited a direct loss of housing, including evictions by homeowners, as one of the main reasons for leaving Delhi during the lockdown.<sup>24</sup> The CSO also documented at least 22 incidents of forced evictions and home demolitions, affecting 13,500 individuals across India, by both Central and State government authorities, between March and June 2020. In Delhi, the Supreme Court had ordered<sup>25</sup> eviction of residents of *jhuggi jhopris* (informal settlements) adjacent to railway tracks in the state, affecting over 48,000 shelters.

A report by Delhi Housing Rights Task Force (DHRTF) notes that less than one-tenth of all shelters were reserved for vulnerable groups like women, children, and families.<sup>26</sup> The report also noted discrimination against transgender persons at these shelters. A recent survey by HLRN on homelessness during the 2nd wave noted that homeless women suffered greatly during the 2021 lockdown in Delhi. Almost all women interviewed by HLRN lived outdoors and could not access free meals provided in shelters. The survey found that the majority of the women (63%) only ate one meal a day during the lockdown and 7% of them could not eat daily due to lack of access to shelters. The study also notes receiving reports of women compelled to give birth outdoors in parks and pavements, without any medical assistance.<sup>27</sup>



22 Mukta Naik, Swastik Harish and Shweta Damle. (2021). *Workers' Housing Needs and the Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) Scheme*. India Housing Report, Working People's Charter and the Centre for Policy Research.

23 Mukta Naik, Swastik Harish and Shweta Damle. (2021). *Workers' Housing Needs and the Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) Scheme*. India Housing Report, Working People's Charter and the Centre for Policy Research.

24 Housing and Land Rights Network (2020) *In Search of Home: A Study on Migrant Workers' Access to Housing and Land*, Housing and Land Rights Network.

25 M.C. Mehta vs Union Of India on 31 August, 2020- Supreme Court Daily orders

26 Delhi Housing Rights Task Force. (2020). *COVID-19 and the Right to Housing in Delhi*. Centre for Policy Research.

27 Housing and Land Rights Network (2020) *In Search of Home: A Study on Migrant Workers' Access to Housing and Land*, Housing and Land Rights Network.



## Cost

In July 2020, the ARHC scheme for migrant workers under the PMAY-U was announced with an estimated amount of Rs. 600 crore as a total outlay of the scheme till the Mission period of PMAY-U i.e., March 2022, to benefit a total of 2.95 lakh beneficiaries as stated by the press release by Government of India. With no costing framework for the two models of development under the ARHC scheme, the allocation of budget for conversion of existing houses and construction of new houses is unclear. However, for a total of 2.95 lakh houses (75,000 existing housing complexes and construction of 40,000 single/double bedrooms and 1,80,000 dormitory beds), the budget comes to Rs 20,340 per house approximately. As per the data available on the dashboard,<sup>28</sup> 25 states have issued RFPs for developing ARHCs under the first model, of which Faridabad in Haryana is the only district under NCR wherein the RFP outlines a total of 2,545 houses for ARHCs. For construction and management of night shelters, the Delhi government had allocated Rs 2,850 lakhs; a 68% increase from the budget allocated for the previous year (Rs 1,700 lakhs).

## Institutional Capacity

An analysis of institutions from both formal actors such as MoHUA, DDA, GNIDA, NDMC, DUSIB, DDMA, State police, political representatives as well as informal actors including CSOs, community groups, labour activists, housing rights campaigns and volunteer groups was done.

The success of ARHC, even as a long-term measure, would largely depend on the institutional capacity of the state governments to deliver on the objectives of the scheme. According to the ARHC dashboard, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan have signed Memorandum of Agreements to implement the scheme, but Delhi has shied away from the same. A media article reportedly quoting a ministry official cites the high cost of repairing the old vacant houses in Delhi, mostly built under UPA's Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission as a deterrent. As each flat would require Rs 1 to 2 lakhs worth of work, the state government stayed away from joining this initiative.<sup>29</sup> While it's too early to comment on the status of each state's institutional capacity to take on the scheme, given the pace at which states have been working on this, it can be safely concluded that currently this does not seem to be high on priority for any of the NCR state governments.

With respect to the DUSIB-run shelter homes, for years there have been reports about the poor conditions under which the night shelters are run, The shelters are run by different agencies contracted by DUSIB and during the pandemic the agencies too complained of delayed payments,<sup>30</sup> with caretakers themselves objecting to irregular payments.<sup>31</sup>

28 RFP orders as per the ARHC website

29 Sharma, S. (July 10, 2020). Housing relief for migrant workers; thousands of PMAY houses ready to move-in: Piyush Goyal. Financial Express.

30 Krishnan, R. (23 December, 2020). Thin blankets & no masks — How Delhi night shelters are coping in a freezing Covid winter. The Print.

31 Bhandari, H. (August 22, 2020). No salary for months, caretakers of night shelters a worried lot. The Hindu.





## Acceptability

The implementation of long-term schemes like ARHC needs consultations with informal workers to get a sense of their ability to pay and afford housing, along with proper framework for successful implementation of the scheme. There were also concerns about the quality of existing vacant government housing stock, which were found to be substandard. It was also noted that most of these housing projects are located far from the areas of work for urban informal workers.<sup>32</sup>

With respect to the Delhi shelter homes, the Delhi Police had highlighted issues of quality of food, shelter spaces and other inadequate facilities in night shelters.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the report by DHRTF notes that many of these shelters did not have adequate facilities, especially for water and sanitation, with residents complaining of dismal living conditions.<sup>34</sup> The report also noted discrimination against transgender persons at these shelters. However, some of these shelter homes also doubled up as Hunger Relief Centres for hot meals and many of the urban poor did benefit from the same, even though it meant standing in long queues for hours.<sup>35</sup> There is also a need for effective vaccination drives for the hundreds living in shelters and informal housing. So far, there are no guidelines or mechanisms in place for vaccination proof needed to access these shelters. It leaves many of these shelter households vulnerable to infection from the virus.

## Relevant Informal / Alternative Mechanism

Apart from providing food and access to healthcare services, several CSOs also pitched in to provide shelter to stranded migrant workers and other segments of the urban informal poor who had been evicted owing to their inability to pay rent. According to a status report filed by the Ministry of Home Affairs to the Supreme Court in April 2020, in the midst of the migrant exodus, NGOs were running a total number of 3,909 active relief camps and shelters for migrant workers (while State governments were running 22,567). However, when it came to food camps for migrant workers, NGOs had far exceeded the efforts of the State governments, with a total of 9,473 camps being run by NGOs as opposed to 7,848 operated by the government.<sup>36</sup> Most of these shelters run by non-state actors were primarily temporary shelters and there are no accounts of permanent hostels or housing options being made available for the urban poor.

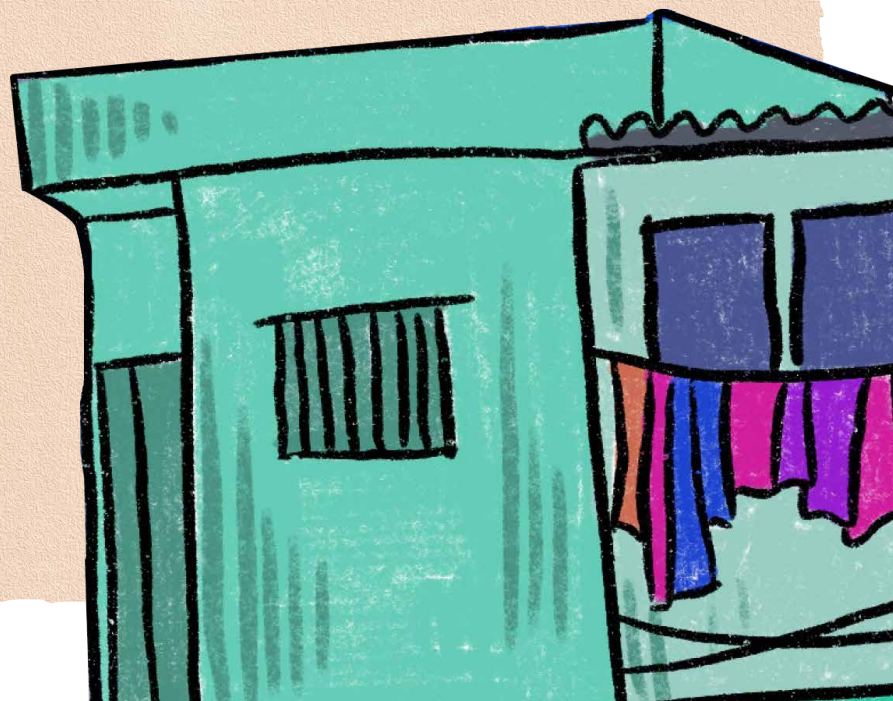
32 Mukta Naik, Swastik Harish and Shweta Damle. (2021). *Workers' Housing Needs and the Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) Scheme*. India Housing Report, Working People's Charter and the Centre for Policy Research

33 Barman, S. (2020). Delhi Police report on migrant camps: Fans not working, bad food. The Indian Express.

34 Delhi Housing Rights Task Force. (2020). *COVID-19 and the Right to Housing in Delhi*. Centre for Policy Research.

35 Source: KII with expert

36 Indo-Asian News Service. (April 7, 2020). Nearly 85 Lakh Provided Food, Over 6 lakh Given Shelter: Center to SC. The New Indian Express.







*Overall, with ARHC being more of a long-term measure, which has progressed at a sluggish pace, and the media reports and anecdotal evidence suggesting a poor response to the shelter homes set up at state-level, it's unlikely that these measures have been effective in providing adequate relief to the shelter needs of urban informal workers. In addition, while the directives by SC and MHA have been appreciated, it did not adopt relevant mechanisms to ensure that these directives were carried through effectively.*



## Recommendations

**a.** Implementation of ARHC scheme in consultation with informal workers to set an affordable rent limit.

**b.** Develop SOPs for states on ARHC for successful implementation. Also, use data on informal workers to ensure adequate housing capacity.

Clear mention of housing for migrants in the ARHC framework, along with provisions for ensuring adequate housing for single women, disabled people and widowed women to ensure housing for all.

**c.** States should set up migrant hostels and night shelters with adequate housing conditions to ensure both temporary and long term shelter for informal workers.