

## **CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN’S GROUPS FROM BHIWANDI (DIST. THANE) IN OPERATING COMMUNITY KITCHENS AND PROVIDING FREE MEALS TO STRANDED MIGRANT WORKFORCE DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN**

Moses Kolet\*, Gazala Bhoje\*\*, Sana Kuwari\*\*\* and Shahrin Bolinjar#

\*Principal, B.N. Bandodkar College of Science (Autonomous), Thane 400601, India

\*\*Dept. of Sociology, G.M. Momin Women’s College, Bhiwandi

\*\*\* G.M. Momin Women;s College, Bhiwandi

#Allana Institute of Management Studies, Mumbai

prinbnb@vpnthane.org

### **ABSTRACT:**

The exceptional pandemic situation and lockdown brought about by COVID-19 is unprecedented and has affected mankind in multiple ways. The global lockdown gave rise to many unique situations and challenges which had to be handled locally. One such challenge was feeding the huge stranded jobless and helpless migrant workforce. Bhiwandi, in western India with its traditional power looms and allied units as well as a logistics hub has been home to a very large migrant population hailing from various parts of India, especially from Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh. The sudden lockdown rendered this huge work force, most of them daily wage earners, jobless and with no means to feed themselves. The self inspired efforts of local women’s groups which came forward and set up community kitchens on charitable funding for charitable causes to offer free meals to the needy migrants, an exercise which continued for almost five months are laudable. This communication deals with the contribution of three such women’s groups, two of which are student’s groups, from Bhiwandi city in providing sustenance to the huge migrant work force till they could return back to their home towns.

**KEY WORDS:** COVID-19, Lockdown, Community kitchens, Bhiwandi, women’s groups

### **INTRODUCTION:**

COVID-19 brought about an unprecedented pandemic of global levels resulting in strict lock downs in many countries including India, where complete lock down was enforced since mid March of the year 2020; to be gradually relaxed in phases since September 2020. The sudden enforcement of total lock down in the country resulted in an unparalleled situation of sudden close down of all facilities and services with the exception of few most essential services, thereby resulting in several challenges affecting varied aspects and facets of life (Dsouza *et al.*, 2020; Gopalan and Misra, 2020; Tisdell, 2020). Non essential manufacturing units were part of the close down enforced. Migrants and shifting populations, with no means of stable security or source of income in their area of work, were amongst the hardest hit due to the lock down; being

rendered without work and means of income overnight. Closure of Railways and all other means of transport ensured their temporary entrapment in their areas of work with no means to return to home towns. The lock down ensured that nobody could travel across long distances and looking for means of livelihood in such scenario was out of question. The situation resulted in lakhs of migrant labourers, some of them with their families and other relations being without work; with no money to buy food and other necessities and no means of transport to go back to home towns. The situation was challenging in metro, mega as well as small cities however all managed to tide over this challenge.

Bhiwandi city, in Thane District of Maharashtra in Western India, is popularly known as the Manchester of India, due to its overwhelmingly large number of power looms and allied industries. In addition to household, small, medium and large scale power loom units, the city surroundings are home to logistics industry and with over fifty thousand warehouses of all sizes, in the vicinity, catering to a wide variety of manufacturing industries, providing employment to employment of lakhs of people. The power loom and logistics industries have ensured sustained presence of a very large migrant population, most of them labourers and daily wages workers, both men and women, in this belt; hailing from all parts of India but notably from Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh. This population generally stays in cheap common accommodations, shared as per their work-shifts and depends on local economical eateries for food. Those with families live in economical rented tenements in different parts of this huge city and its surroundings. Like the rest of the country COVID-19 pandemic affected Bhiwandi also, but the exceptionally large numbers of migrants and floating population in this area made a huge and serious difference in handling of the situation by local authorities. This serious situation of lakhs of migrant daily wage earners rendered jobless overnight (Menon, 2020), locked inside their crowded accommodations, with no money, no food and no eateries to spend the meager savings and resources at their disposal and with nowhere to go presented a bleak scenario.

In response to this exceptional problem in the city, came an equally unique solution from its residents. It is in this scenario as explained earlier and strict lock down conditions that several local groups, especially women's groups voluntarily and as a self inspired initiative took upon themselves as a social responsibility to start community kitchens to cater to feeding the helpless and stranded migrant workers and their families, totally free of charge, an operation which continued for almost five months from the beginning of lock down in mid March 2020 to July

2020 till partial lifting of the strict lockdown and partial beginning of railway and road transport facilities to travel back to home towns. A search of literature in this area of work revealed very scanty documented information, especially from the area of study. This paper deals with documentation of three such laudable self motivated efforts by women's groups in establishing and successfully operating community kitchens in different areas of Bhiwandi city for the huge helpless and stranded migrant workforce during COVID-19 lockdown. Two of the three women's groups documented are student's groups, one of these being an active self motivated charity group called Hope: the helping hands.

#### **MATERIALS AND METHODS:**

Data was gathered by conducting a questionnaire based survey of the three groups on their nature of work and number of migrants catered to. Reports in local newspapers lead to the groups being approached, surveyed and documented. Bhiwandi has a known record of a very large population of migrant workforce (Wajihuddin, 2020). All of the groups documented were women's groups, two of them being student's groups, operating in collaboration with NGOs and with the help of family, support from male relatives and volunteers for home delivery of meals to migrants during lockdown, since the crowds of the needy assembling for meals were huge.

#### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:**

All three of the women's groups conducted the charitable work of operating community kitchens and providing meals free of charge to helpless migrant workers stranded in lock down; on voluntary basis on humanitarian grounds. Over 2300 migrant workers were fed daily, involving over 6700 meals every day during the initial months of pandemic situation. All their efforts were purely humane and self motivated. The magnitude of this task was clearly out of reach of any average single person's funding; every group started with own and family funds; deriving all other help and manpower from extended family. One group, known as Hope: The helping hands had been an active group comprising women students working for the welfare of needy women. This all women student's group started functioning with support from their families and established their community kitchen with their limited resources, catering to the migrant workforce. Two other women's groups, inclusive of another self motivated students group started in collaboration with NGOs for financial, logistical and manpower support. All groups also appealed to local philanthropists for funding this exercise which was carried on for almost five months till the partial lifting of lockdown and till resumption of means of transport to respective

native places. All three groups provided hygienic vegetarian as well as non-vegetarian food. Meals were provided free of charge to all needy without any ethnic bias. All the groups operated with permission from local authorities and while following all norms and guidelines during the lock down. The scope of work of the three women's groups is presented in Table 1.

COVID-19 pandemic brought with it several exceptional issues at global level (UNESCO, 2020). While the COVID-19 pandemic related lock down was a very trying time it also brought out the human side of our populace all over the world (Golightly and Holloway, 2020), many of whom voluntarily and happily contributed their time, money, efforts and while even risking their lives for feeding the needy as seen in the present study. As in all over the world, women were in the forefront of countering COVID-19 in India too (The World Bank, 2020). While community kitchens were established by the government and local governments (Sadanandan, 2020), the efforts of women's groups in this respect have largely gone unnoticed except for stray and scanty articles in the local print media and definitely, these self inspired efforts need to be brought into the lime light. Documentation of the three women's groups in this paper is an attempt in this direction.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Voluntary and self motivated women's groups played a key role in catering to food needs of the huge migrant labour force in Bhiwandi (Dist. Thane), rendered jobless and helpless due to the unprecedented lockdown situation arising out of COVID-19 pandemic; by providing free meals for a sustained period. The three groups documented collectively catered to food needs of over 2300 migrants, serving over 6700 meals daily. The efforts of these women's groups, especially the student groups are laudable and need special mention.

### **REFERENCES:**

- Dsouza, D. D., Quadros, S., Hyderabadwala, Z. J. and Mamun, M. A. (2020). Aggregated COVID-19 suicide incidences in India: Fear of COVID-19 infection is the prominent causative factor. *Psychiatry Research* 290, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113145>.
- [Golightly](#) M. and [Holloway](#), M. (2020). Social Work in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic: All in This Together? *Br J Soc Work*. 50(3): 637–641.
- Menon, A. G. (2020). 6 lakh migrants in Maharashtra's Bhiwandi left in lurch amid lockdown. *Hindustan Times*, May 17, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/6-lakh-migrants-in-maharashtra-s-bhiwandi-left-in-lurch-amid-lockdown/story-Xy0Je5zUI4AY86cg7qMAHP.html>

Redondo-Sama, G., Matulic, V., Munté-Pascual, A. and de Vicente, I. (2020). Social Work during the COVID-19 Crisis: Responding to Urgent Social Needs. *Sustainability* 12, 8595; doi:10.3390/su12208595.

Sadanandan, R. (2020). Kerala's response to COVID-19. *Indian J Public Health* 64, Suppl S2: 99-101.

The World Bank. (2020). In India, women's self help groups combat the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic. Feature Story, April 2020.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/04/11/women-self-help-groups-combat-covid19-coronavirus-pandemic-india>

Tisdell, C. A. (2020). Economic, social and political issues raised by the COVID-19 pandemic. *Economic Analysis and Policy* 68: 17-28.

UNESCO. (2020). Mapping of online articles on COVID-19 and gender. <https://en.unesco.org/news/mapping-online-articles-covid-19-and-gender>

Wajihuddin, M. (2020). Bhiwandi hopes for 'orange' status to restart looms, 2 lakh men on standby. TNN, April 16, 2020.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/bhiwandi-hopes-for-orange-status-to-restart-loom-2-lakh-men-on-standby/articleshow/75173293.cms>

**Table 1:** Contribution of the three women's groups in operating Community kitchens for migrants in Bhiwandi

Group No.	Area of operation	Collaboration with NGO	Daily number of meals provided per session* (Nos)	Sessions of meals provided*	Period of operation	Mode of service	Average number of migrants catered to daily (Nos.)	Percentage of women and children among beneficiaries (%)
1 <sup>@</sup>	Nizampur and all over Bhiwandi city	Janhit Foundation	1500	Breakfast Lunch Dinner	Mid March 2020 to July 2020	Served on site, Take home, Delivered to home	4500	30
2	Bunder Mohalla	Nargis Dutt Foundation	700	Breakfast Lunch Dinner	Mid March 2020 to July 2020	Served on site, Take home, Delivered to home	2100	25-30
3 <sup>@</sup>	Tandel Muhalla	-	150	Dinner	May 2020	Take Home	150	20

• Most of the beneficiaries being from minority Muslim community, the schedule of meals was appropriately modified in the month of Ramzan  
 @ students groups