

Plight of migrant construction-site workers during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020: A qualitative exploration in Bhavnagar, Western India

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: During the unexpected lockdown implemented in early 2020 in reaction to the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, a considerable section of India's population of migrant construction-site workers were stuck.

OBJECTIVE: Our objective was to explore the lived experiences and consequent perceptions of migrant workers related to the COVID-19 lockdown and the consequences on their lives.

METHODS: We conducted structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) with twelve migrant construction-site workers in Bhavnagar, Western India, from November to December 2020, using qualitative research methods. All IDIs were conducted with participant's consent, audio-recorded, transcribed in English, inductively coded, and thematically analyzed.

RESULTS: The primary financial challenges mentioned by the migrant workers in the interviews were unemployment, monetary issues, and a difficult sustenance. The social concerns were described as anxious migrant exodus, discrimination, mistreatment, lack of social assistance, inability to fulfil their family's expectations, lack of safe transportation arrangements by the authorities during the exodus, inadequacies in the public distribution system, law and order, and apathy of their employers. The psychological repercussions were described using terms like "fear," "worry," "loneliness," "boredom," "helplessness," and "trapped." Monetary compensation, job opportunities at the native place, and a well-managed migrant exodus were reportedly their key expectations from the government. Healthcare issues mentioned during the lockdown included a lack of facilities to treat common ailments, substandard care, and repeated COVID-19 testing prior to departure.

CONCLUSION: The study highlights the need to have rehabilitation mechanisms such as targeted cash transfers, ration kits, and safe transportation services for migrant workers through inter-sectoral coordination for mitigating hardship.

Keywords: COVID-19, quarantine, psychological stress, financial stress, social isolation, India

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1. Introduction

Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) has been a raging pandemic for over three years, with 559 million cases registered globally [1]. As of July 17, 2022, India reported 43.9 million cases [1]. Initial preventative steps taken by countries to halt the spread of the pandemic included the closure of schools and universities, as well as the quarantine of international travelers from specific countries. COVID-19 testing and isolation facilities were gradually expanded to keep the virus under control. However, in anticipation of a surge in the number of cases and consequent overwhelming of the health services, a pre-emptive country-wide lockdown was imposed in India at the start of the pandemic [2–4]. To combat the spread of COVID-19 cases, the Government of India enforced a countrywide lockdown for the first time on March 24, 2020, for a continuous period of 21 days, limiting the movements of India's 1.37 billion people [3, 5]. After three weeks, the Government of India extended the lockdown again, bringing the nationwide lockdown until May 31, 2020 [6]. Life came to a standstill, with a majority of the working population losing their livelihood and opportunities for earning their routine wages [7, 8].

During the lockdown, migrant laborers were among the most vulnerable groups [9–11]. According to the 2011 census, India has around 45 million migrant workers. However, according to the Economic Survey for 2016–2017 and the National Sample Survey (NSS) working group report on migration, the 2011 census underestimated this figure, which was closer to 96 million [12]. Migrant workers in India are mostly from the rural heartland, where they frequently endure marginalization and discrimination based on a variety of interconnected variables such as caste, creed, nativity, and other social difficulties [13]. In this demographic group, social vulnerability frequently emerges as insufficient access to sanitation, health services, employment possibilities, social security, the public distribution system, and other welfare schemes [13–15], and even violence, humiliation, and exploitation at times [13, 16]. Migration for employment is a well-established tendency in many such communities, with males migrating to more industrialised states to work as daily wage laborers or blue-collar employees. It is debatable whether migration provides significant economic empowerment to migrant workers because they are likely to face hardships adjusting to the urban lifestyle and securing meaningful employment; underpayment and discrim-

ination of migrant workers in comparison to local workers have been reported. However, migrant workers never truly lose their roots and return to their native home and family on occasions of joy or sorrow.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies of migrant workers revealed a high vulnerability to infection, behavioral health issues, and a lack of family support [9, 17]. Gujarat, a relatively prosperous state in Western India, is a popular destination for migrant workers from other Indian states seeking employment opportunities. The majority of these workers hail from economically weaker states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh. Some of these states, such as Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, are close neighbours of Gujarat, while others are far off. The majority of these people engage in unorganized sectors as daily wage or low-pay laborers. In Gujarat, construction sites are among the largest employers of such workers. During the lockdown, the predicament of these workers may be regarded indicative of that of most migrant workers across the country. During the lockdown, we, the investigators, were actively involved in caring for COVID-19 patients admitted to the district hospital, as well as in supportive supervision of community-based containment activities such as home visits to those in quarantine/ isolation/ containment zones in Bhavnagar, Gujarat. This allowed us to interact with construction workers who were stranded in Bhavnagar during the lockdown and in need of healthcare and subsistence support. Meanwhile, news outlets in India reported on the difficulties experienced by migrant workers during the lockdown. This prompted us to investigate migrant workers' experiences on construction sites in order to better understand and empathize with their lived experiences and perceptions on the need for improvements in support services to alleviate hardship. Our overall aim was to synthesize primary evidence in order to guide future policy decisions on lockdown preparedness and hardship alleviation initiatives for migrant workers.

2. Methods

2.1. Theoretical framework

The theory of vulnerability is based on the concept of the universal, ambiguous, and ever-present vulnerability of all human beings and the responsibility of states towards vulnerable subjects [18]. The

harm that may be done to a person as a result of this innate vulnerability can only be mitigated, not eliminated. Co-cultural theory explains how a historically marginalized group communicates and interacts with a historically privileged/dominant group [19]. The impact of every unpleasant incident differs for these populations because diverse communities have distinct sociological and economic positions. One community might be harmed more severely as compared to the other. Several factors can influence the existing vulnerability and can alter the interactions among different groups. The attitude of the dominant group/ community towards the marginalized community also plays a key role in affecting the perception of the vulnerable group. A sudden implementation of nationwide lockdown and cessation of construction work neither gave ample time nor opportunity to the migrant construction-site workers to make suitable arrangements for basic necessities. According to India Migration Now, a Mumbai-based non-profit, it was unclear who the 'employer' was and therefore who was obligated to pay full salaries to migrant construction-site employees during the lockdown [20]. It may have given the impression that the governing organizations did not consider the vast number of migrant construction workers. Our assumption that the COVID-19 lockdown worsened migrant workers' vulnerability was connected to the aforementioned theories.

2.2. Research team

The first author (AR) was the principal investigator of the study, whereas the other listed authors were co-investigators. AR and SS are pursuing their Doctor of Medicine (MD) course in Community Medicine under the guidance of MR who possesses an MD degree in Community Medicine. RM, Ph.D. in population studies, and AM, MD Community Medicine, work for a non-profit public health research organization. SS belongs to the state of Uttar Pradesh, a predominant state with out-migration of workers to other parts of India. She is familiar with the language and dialects used by migrant workers. All the investigators were trained in qualitative research methods. All the in-depth interviews were conducted by AR and SS, with guidance provided by MR, RM, and AM.

2.3. Study design

We undertook an exploratory descriptive qualitative study because we expected persons experiencing

COVID-19 lockdown to identify paths that worsened migrant workers' existing vulnerabilities, and to suggest steps that might be used to mitigate this issue. The study follows the COREQ qualitative research reporting criteria [21]. In-depth interviews were performed with migrant construction-site workers in Bhavnagar, Gujarat state, western India, to explore migrant workers' perceptions of the effect COVID-19 lockdown had on financial, social, and psychological facets of their life. Based on the constructivist paradigm, the authors anticipate that the experiences and reflections on those experiences of participants will shed light on their understanding and knowledge of the world in which they live.

2.4. Study setting and duration

We performed our research among migrant laborers at construction sites in Bhavnagar, which is about 125 miles southwest of Gujarat's state capital. It is one of Gujarat's remote cities, with long commutes to other states. The city primarily comprises service-class people with a few involved in small-scale businesses. Even though the city is one of the eight Municipal Corporations, which are a type of local government in India that administers urban areas with a population of more than one million within the Gujarat state, Bhavnagar has a population of ~0.6 million only [22]. Given the city's semi-urban nature, thirteen construction sites were identified where migrant laborers, predominantly from Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, and Bihar, had worked at the time of the study. All the in-depth interviews were conducted from November-December 2020.

2.5. Inclusion criteria

Migrant workers above the age of 18 years, working at construction sites of Bhavnagar city, having their native places outside the state of Gujarat, and who stayed at the construction sites during the first part of the lockdown were included in this study. Migrant workers who refused to give written informed consent to participate were excluded from the study.

2.6. Sampling

The list of operational construction sites was received from the District Panchayat office, which is the elected body of the third tier of the Panchayati Raj System, led by the District Collector, and is respon-

sible for the administration of the district's rural regions. The investigators visited these construction sites to ensure their functionality and to establish rapport with the contractor or local supervisor of the construction site, as well as the "leader," or the principal contact person in charge of the group of migrant workers at each site. Three construction sites were purposively chosen with migrant workers from other states. Before the research began, AR, SS, and MR made repeated visits (3-4 times) to the selected sites to meet and create rapport with migrant workers. They addressed the goal of this research and the potential future advantages of its results. The researchers purposefully chose migrant workers who were more likely to reply openly. Each participant was informed the benefits and purpose of the research using the participant information sheet (PIS), after their eligibility was confirmed. The PIS was translated into Hindi for ease of comprehension. Each in-depth interview was done after the subjects provided written informed consent. The entire rapport-building and data-collection procedure took roughly two months.

2.7. Data collection

A guide for conducting in-depth interviews that included basic demographic details of the study participants was used. The interview guide was prepared in English and was later translated into Hindi. The instrument was pretested with three migrant construction workers who were not included in the study. The in-depth interview guide included questions about the effects of the lockdown on the financial, social, and psychological facets of migrant workers' life. Face-to-face semi-structured (structured items of inquiry with unstructured interviewer-led probes) interviews were conducted at the makeshift houses of the migrant workers near the construction sites. All of the interviews were conducted in Hindi as the participants were more comfortable conversing in this language. The average duration of the interviews conducted was 20 minutes, ranging from 17-23 minutes. No other person (onlooker) was present during the interviews.

Following each interview, key points were recorded and compared in subsequent interviews to detect information saturation. We noticed that fresh information yield began to plateau around the tenth interview. No new information could be gathered by the 12th full interview. Nonetheless, we tried the 13th interview to check whether we were still missing any significant code. This interview, unfortunately,

could not be finished since the participant refused to continue shortly after we initiated it because he could not stand revisiting the unpleasant incident. As a result, the group of investigators agreed that we had reached information saturation and concluded the data acquired with the 12 interviews we had conducted thus far.

Each in-depth interview began with formal interactions about the discussion of work, condition of living, duration of work, and other demographic details. To maintain the quality of data, only one in-depth interview was carried out in a day. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent from study participants. Each of the interviews was anonymized to maintain confidentiality. There were no repeat interviews. The transcripts or results were not returned to participants for any comments or corrections.

2.8. Analysis

The authors prepared verbatim transcriptions of all audio recordings, which were subsequently translated from Hindi to English. The transcripts were read several times in order to grasp the context and substance. Following that, the transcripts were free-listed, coded, and categorised into distinct themes through an iterative process of peer review among the authors. The results were summarised based on the many themes that emerged for the perceived challenges and enablers during the lockdown, as well as the expectations of the participants from the authorities. Key phrases and quotable quotations were chosen to reflect and clarify the study findings.

3. Results

A total of 12 (11 males and 1 female) migrant workers at construction sites in Bhavnagar city were interviewed. The age of the participants ranged from 19-45 years with a median of 30 years. Among the participants, six were from Uttar Pradesh, one from Bihar, and five were from Odisha state. The time since they had begun migrating in search of work ranged from six months to 20 years. The themes that emerged regarding the consequences of lockdown on migrant workers' lives have been summarized in Fig. 1. Participant descriptions of their expectations from the government and the factors that created an enabling environment for them during the lockdown have been enumer-

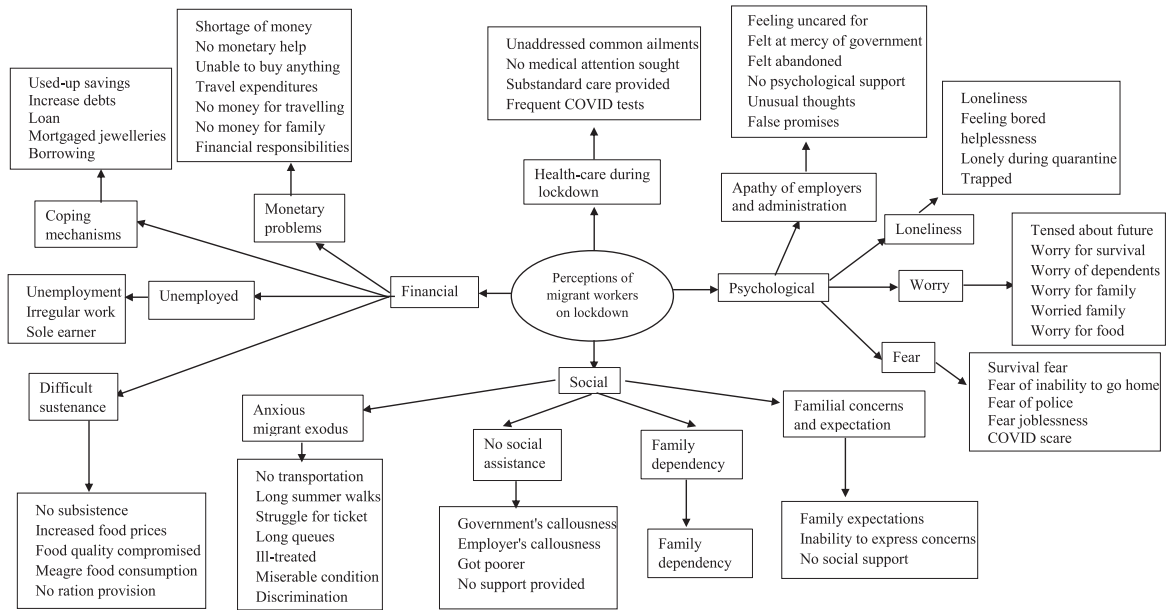


Fig. 1. Perceptions of migrant construction-site workers regarding the consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown.

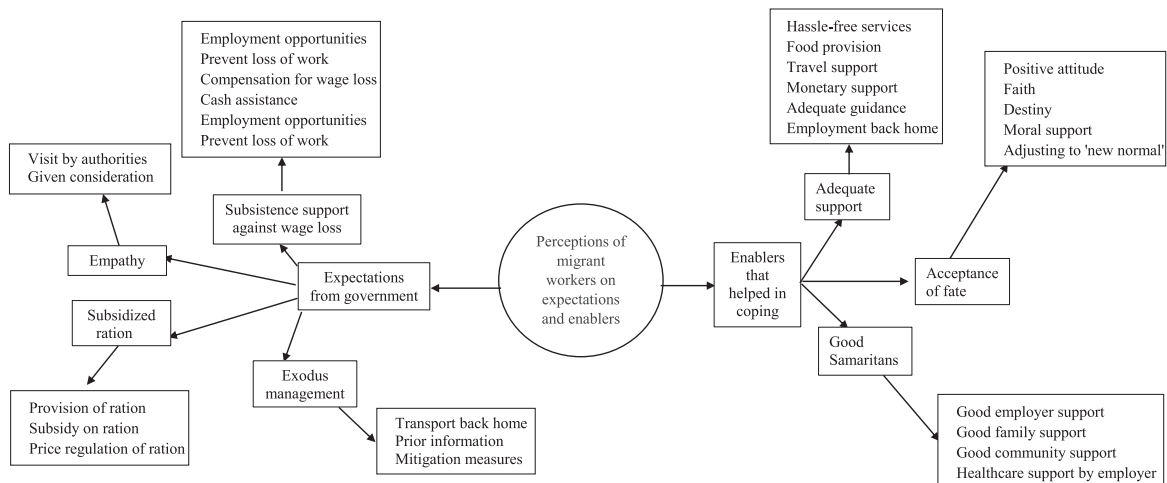


Fig. 2. Perceptions of migrant construction-site workers regarding the expectations from the government and enablers during the COVID-19 lockdown.

ated in Fig. 2. The detailed description of each code has been detailed in the Mendeley repository (<https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/gvmdvsvyxx/2>).

3.1. Consequences of lockdown on the financial life of migrant workers

3.1.1. Unemployment

The absolute closure of factories and construction work during the lockdown left the migrant work-

ers jobless and without any alternative employment. Almost all the participants perceived that unemployment and irregular work resulted in inconsistent or no income. Being the sole earner in the family contributed to their woes.

“I was jobless and was just sitting idle for 2-2.5 months.” (45-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“Holidays were going on. So sometimes I used to get work, sometimes not. Our employer was

likewise perplexed when the orders arrived to not work on-site or else they would be penalized.” (19-year-old female from Uttar Pradesh)

3.1.2. Monetary problems

The lockdown resulted in the loss of work, and hence a source of income. This caused a slew of financial challenges in the life of migrant workers. Many migrant workers thought they couldn't buy things for themselves and couldn't send money home. For a few, familial responsibilities had to be postponed. All migrant workers perceived that they spent their own money to reach their homes. Some felt that they were not provided any monetary help.

“My only expectations were that I wanted to get my sister married. The money that we had saved for marriage was spent, the marriage was postponed, and also the debt kept on increasing, so how will all this happen? How will I get my sister married as the time of her marriage is passing by and she is getting older day by day?” (28-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“A bus was arranged for us to go to our village. 35–55 people reached their respective villages with the help of that bus. I bought the tickets with my own money.” (30-year-old male from Odisha)

3.1.3. Coping mechanisms

The majority of the migrant workers stated that they managed by either borrowing, taking loans, mortgaging, or from their savings, to tide over financial hardship.

“We received 500 rupees in my daughter's bank account under the government scheme. Other than that, I took a loan from local lenders.” (45-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“I mortgaged ornaments with the jeweler and took money in return.” (45-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“The little money that I had saved was spent on the food in the initial days itself; then food distribution started but sometimes we received it sometimes we didn't. Somehow, we survived.” (28-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.1.4. Difficult sustenance

The most common problem the migrant workers faced at the construction sites was food provision. Some of the migrant workers felt that the distribution

of rations was irregular and of substandard quality. High prices of essential items were also a source of concern for some.

“Sometimes we received food only once a day and slept by drinking water [on empty stomach] and took rest. I ate whatever [food] came by even if it was raw or not good.” (28-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“On one hand we are carpenters and earn only around 450 rupees per day and on the other hand, the prices of vegetables are so high. Potatoes are sold at 50 rupees per kg. If I purchase 2 kg potatoes, 100 rupees will be used for that. The remaining amount with me used to be 350 rupees. What will I eat and what will I send to my parents in the village?” (19-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“We used to receive food from trustees but it wasn't regularly provided.” (22-year-old male from Odisha)

“As I was stuck here at that time I was not thinking about my family. I was only thinking about myself, whether I could survive without food or not.” (28-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.2. Consequences of lockdown on social lives of migrant workers

3.2.1. Anxious migrant exodus

An abrupt announcement of lockdown without proper provision for reverse migration created a lot of confusion and chaos. The majority of the migrant workers perceived that they had to face challenges in procuring a ticket and in reaching their home safely. Some reported discrimination and mistreatment during transit.

“Yes, I had faced a lot of problems in reaching home. For about 15 days, I walked 12–13 kilometers and after that, I obtained a ticket. I was hungry and thirsty at that time.” (28-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“They [the administration] said there will be no charges for the ticket, still, they charged us for the same.” (19-year-old female from Uttar Pradesh)

“People stayed away from us as if we were strangers. On our way home, we faced many problems related to food and other things. We were

treated like dogs and were asked to stay away.” (35-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“They discriminated with us, they put us in quarantine for 14 days, away from our village. We lived in a separate building and only after 14 days did I go home.” (28-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.2.2. No social assistance

Many perceived that no social assistance of any kind was given by the government or employers whether it was in the form of moral support or their physical presence.

“We didn’t receive any help from the government.” (35-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“He [the employer] told us to look into things for ourselves and he didn’t care if we had received food or not.” (19-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“There was no one to listen to our plights or problems in the difficult time. We had no option other than adjusting to the situation.” (45-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.2.3. Familial concerns and expectations

The dependent family members have certain expectations from the earner of the family. They are also concerned about the well-being of the person they care about, who is miles away from them. The same was true for the migrant workers. Very few migrant workers felt an inability to express their misery to their parents and deliberately hid information to avoid giving undue tension to them. Few were also disappointed for failing to match familial expectations.

“They constantly asked for money but I didn’t have it and I wasn’t even earning.” (45-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“My kids used to tell me over the phone to come back soon. They were also hoping that I would bring back some money and clothes for them. But as I wasn’t earning, how could I manage to live up to their expectations.” (35-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“My parents were worried at home. They used to cry over the phone. They used to ask how I was and what I was doing, but I couldn’t answer their questions for if they knew about the difficulties

that I had to face here, they will be hurt more.” (19-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.2.4. Family dependency

As many of the migrant workers were the sole earners, their family members were dependent on them financially. All of the familial responsibilities were on their shoulders. They were unable to meet their familial obligations due to job loss.

“My entire family is dependent on me. I am the only one who earns money and provides food for them . . . My sister has reached marriageable age, as has my brother, and here my work was shut down for 2-3 months.” (28-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.3. Consequences of lockdown on the psychological health of migrant workers

3.3.1. Apathy of employers and administration

The participants deemed that their employers and the administration could have been more empathetic; apathy was perceived as distressful. For some, the promises made to them were perceived as unfulfilled.

“I felt bad that no one came to meet and console us in this difficult situation.” (45-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“Some people even received financial help of 1000 rupees in their bank accounts. But I didn’t receive that. Also, when I was in quarantine I was given false comfort by saying that some money will be deposited in my bank account as help and also I will be given some work as I was jobless. But none of those promises were fulfilled by them.” (35 year male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.3.2. Fear

Many people were unable to leave their houses and were stuck; they were terrified of starving or not being able to reach their native land safely. This was in addition to the fear of contracting COVID-19 on the way. There was also the fear of being chased away by the police since mass movements were restricted, therefore, some avoided going out to buy even the essential items.

“We were scared because I have two children and what if they caught coronavirus. Then what will we do? That is why we were scared.” (19-year-old female from Uttar Pradesh)

“There was a fear of corona. I also feared of not being able to reach home and of getting stuck midway.” (A young male from Uttar Pradesh)

“We feared going anywhere as we thought we will be beaten by police.” (19-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.3.3. Worries

Being so far away from their home and family during times of global pandemic can be particularly difficult. Many migrant workers were concerned about themselves, their families, and the uncertainties that surrounded them.

“I worried for them (family) and they worried for me.” (30-year-old male from Odisha)

“If I am unable to pay my debt, how will I pursue my plans?” (28-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“I used to crave badly even for one meal a day.” (19-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.3.4. Loneliness

Loneliness, boredom, a sense of helplessness, and the feeling of being trapped were experienced by many.

“I was bored as I had to sit in one room and had no one to talk to. I even could not go out because of the corona.” (19-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“I felt trapped from all sides. I had constant thoughts of how my family and kids would be surviving. We all decided to take loans and thought that when we will earn in future, we would repay them.” (45-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“I was unhappy as I was trapped here, my family members were also facing problems” (19-year-old male from Odisha)

3.4. Healthcare issues during lockdown

Hampered local transport systems and shortage of money discouraged migrant workers to seek medical assistance. While many received financial assistance from their employers, a few had to do it on their own. A few participants did not seek any medical attention while some said that the medical care they received during the lockdown was dissatisfactory. Many of them reported COVID-19 testing prior to the travel.

“If someone fell ill or had fever or something, they managed to cure it with their own money. Or else, they approached the government hospitals.” (35-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“We have faced many problems, like headache, fever, but we did not go to the doctor because of fear and also we didn’t have money.” (28-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“Some medical services were given to us, but they were not good at all.” (28-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“We were tested here as well as when we reached our village.” (35-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“A doctor checked us, they gave us the report . . . then we boarded the bus and went to our village.” (30-year-old male from Odisha).

3.5. Expectations from the government during lockdown

3.5.1. Subsistence support against wage loss

If the migrant workers had received financial aid, they would not have felt the need to return to their homes despite the harsh conditions. Many migrant workers expected the government to compensate them financially and deposit the promised amount into their bank accounts. Prevention of loss of their work and creation of job opportunities at their native place was expected by some.

“We appeal to the government to just deposit the money in our accounts which we were promised, but didn’t receive.” (35-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

“The only thing was that lockdown stopped my work. If it wouldn’t have been stopped, then I could have earned something.” (22-year-old male from Odisha)

“If we were offered work in our village itself, it would be best for us. As when we come here to work, we have to do all the household chores ourselves and we have to stay away from our families. I need to work for at least 10 months a year to fulfill all needs of my family. Getting work for just 1 or 2 months in a whole year wouldn’t work for me as I only earn 7,000–8,000 rupees per month, unlike the richer people who earn 10,000–20,000

rupees per month." (35 year male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.5.2. Exodus management

The most difficult decision for the migrant workers might have been to travel from one place of uncertainty to another. A well-managed reverse migration process may have alleviated some of the migrant workers' concerns. Some migrant workers expected better-managed transportation facilities. Prior information about such lockdowns was suggested by a few.

"I just want to suggest to them that if such a situation arises again, they should at least provide us facilities of train or bus tickets to reach our hometown." (30-year-old male from Odisha)

"The government should at least inform us before imposing the lockdown so that we can reach our native places where we feel that we will remain safe." (34 years old male from Bihar)

3.5.3. Subsidized ration

The migrant workers did not have the necessary documents to collect free rations. Therefore, some migrant workers expected the government to control the high prices of rations, while others expected easier access to low-cost rations.

"The cost of basic necessities such as pulses and rice has surged. So, government should lower the cost of these items. People have a ration card, they acquire grains through it. We don't have a ration card." (19-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.5.4. Empathy

Migrant workers, who may have fled oppression or poor living conditions to seek better opportunities, want to be able to live their lives with dignity. They felt abandoned when no official or their employer visited them even once. Some expected to be given more consideration like being visited or addressed by the government officials in such a crisis.

"Whenever they ask something from us, we give it to them. When it's our chance to ask for something, they don't even pay heed to it." (19-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

"The government doesn't care for the public. Everything is happening in front of them. But still, they don't care if we live or die." (19-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.6. Enablers that helped in coping

A few instances came to the notice of the public where measures were taken to help the migrant workers during the time of crisis. These measures were taken by different people in their way. Individual or institutional-level actions were implemented to assist migrant workers with food, transportation to their homes, or simply an encouragement to not lose hope.

3.6.1. Good Samaritans

Despite the adversities, some people came forward to help the migrant workers in every possible way. During such trying circumstances, many migrant workers received financial, travel, food, and lodging assistance from their employers. Government agencies in the state of Gujarat and the native states of the migrant workers were perceived as helpful by many.

"Here, some help was provided by the government, police officers and the villagers used to bring us food... Some even brought medicines for us." (45 years old male from Uttar Pradesh)

"Our boss was a Gujarati [a person belonging to the state of Gujarat]. He used to call us in the courtyard of his house and give us food." (33-year-old male from Odisha)

"We received three meals of the day from the government and grains of one month. We acquired grains separately from Aadhaar card too [Aadhaar is a unique identity card given to citizens of India]." (A young male from Uttar Pradesh)

3.6.2. Acceptance of fate

Positive support from their family kept many of the migrant workers content and encouraged them not to lose hope. Some even accepted that when everything was closed then they were bound to face some issues.

"We took the situation positively and thought that when everything is closed then, naturally, we will have to face a few difficulties." (45-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

"We encouraged each other, hoping that everything will become normal soon." (34-year-old male from Bihar)

3.6.3. Financial support

Some migrant workers perceived that travel, monetary support, and ration were adequately provided by

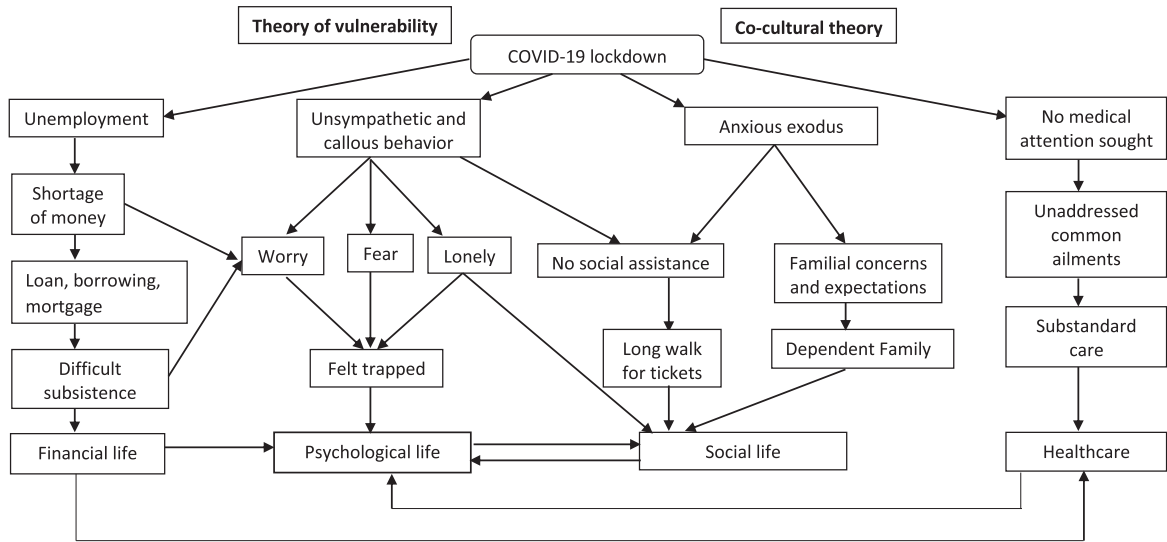


Fig. 3. Co-cultural theory and theory of vulnerability explaining perceptions of migrant construction-site workers regarding the consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown.

the administration, employers, and philanthropists. Employment opportunities back home were perceived as an enabler by some migrant workers.

“After I was discharged [from quarantine facility], they gave me 2000 rupees ... after that, I was supplied rice and ration.” (30-year-old male from Odisha)

“They [government] gave us some work related to road construction through which we earned some money.” (45-year-old male from Uttar Pradesh)

4. Discussion

According to the Economic Survey (2018-19), 93% of the total workforce in India is in the unorganized sector, a sector that is constituted by small and scattered units which are not registered with the government [23]. According to an estimate, the total workforce in the country is 450 million - of this, 93% comes at 419 million [23]. These workers comprise migrant laborers, street vendors, and domestic workers [23]. The present study highlighted a multitude of issues faced by migrant construction-site workers during the lockdown imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19 in India. As their work was disrupted, money became scarce, resulting in financial difficulties. With no work opportunities, there was a general lack of purpose in staying at the place of migration, therefore many believed returning home to their fam-

ily was their only option. However, they believed that the government failed to adequately handle their return journey. Some migrant workers decided to lie or not speak about their predicament during the lockdown to avoid upsetting their families. They felt scared, trapped, worried, and lonely. As illustrated in Fig. 3, these findings affirmed our assumptions of an increase in the plight of migrant construction-site workers due to the COVID-19 lockdown linked to the vulnerability and co-cultural theories [18, 19].

These stories resonated with some migrant workers working in the unorganized sectors during the government-imposed COVID-19 lockdown in India. The lack of effective rules governing the unorganised sector has operated as a barrier to ensure their social and financial security [9, 24, 25]. During the lockdown, local transport was disrupted and many migrant workers had to walk long distances for registration and obtaining a train/ bus ticket. In the absence of tickets, some tried walking back to their native home [26]. Being low on money and fear of getting infected may have been the root cause of unaddressed health problems [27]. As quarantine was mandatory upon reaching home, many perceived it as discrimination [27]. Insufficient facilities provided in their native places may have strengthened this perception. Together with these sudden turns of events, loneliness and low social support might have led to their perceived psychological stress. The migrant workers felt that their employers and the administration did not care enough about them, as many of them did

not receive sufficient assistance for subsistence and felt rather helpless [28]. The transportation barrier, along with the lack of facilities to seek care for their psychological problems like anxiety and stress during the lockdown, and the stigma associated with it might have prevented them from seeking any counselling. For many, a positive attitude and good family support helped to cope with the crisis.

Evidence suggested internal migrant workers suffer from high levels of anxieties and fears due to various concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic and need psycho-social support [29, 30]. Because the majority of male migrant workers do not live with family members, loneliness leads them to succumb to behavioural health concerns such as depression [31]. Loss of loved ones in the pandemic, and feeling of helplessness in attending to the health needs of the family members staying away in villages might also aggravate the stress [9]. Another study also reported that internal migrant workers suffer from a high prevalence of anxiety, psychotic, and post-traumatic disorders due to socio-environmental adversities, such as loss of social status and discrimination [32]. Public health strategies such as mandatory isolation or quarantine in the government's temporary shelters at their native places increased the feeling of loneliness causing behavioral health concerns and may have led them to extreme steps such as suicide [33].

The migrant workers in our study perceived the support received during the COVID-19 lockdown in terms of money, food, and employment opportunities as enablers that helped them in coping with such testing times. Several measures could have been taken to alleviate the plight of the migrant workers. The measures to contain the pandemic could have been taken considering people of all walks of life and economic statuses. A robust system could have been established to record and register the migrant workers who work and live away from their place of residence. This may have enabled them to utilize existing social security mechanisms such as the public distribution system (PDS). Budget and spending on social security could have been boosted. Furthermore, the relief package announced should have been as per the need and the actual number of migrant workers who were stranded in places away from their homes. Local transportation may have been provided to allow migrant workers to meet their basic needs, such as health care and ticket procurement. In general, a system for the education of the children of migrant workers, safe working conditions, better housing conditions and vigorous steps to reduce their oppression can help in uplifting

the migrant workers. Such steps might have helped migrant workers feel more safe and included, and could have alleviated some of their suffering.

4.1. Strengths and limitations of the study

It was difficult to undertake primary community-based research during the COVID-19 waves in 2020. Our study provides first-hand information on the condition of migrant workers in India during the COVID-19 lockdown, which has been mostly under-represented in the published literature. Our report, however, has limited transferability given that our sample was from a single site that may or may not represent a country as populous and heterogeneous as India. We could not enumerate gender influences on our findings as there was only one female participant in the study. Furthermore, information on programmatic entitlements and perspectives from other stakeholders could not be collated for this study.

5. Conclusions

The study highlights the need to have rehabilitation mechanisms for migrant workers through inter-sectoral coordination as an essential preparedness measure during and after the imposition of lockdowns. Targeted cash transfers, ration kits, and safe transportation services could be some options to focus upon for mitigating hardship. Following COVID-19, certain measures have been undertaken, such as adopting inter-state transferable ration cards and expanding uptake through guaranteed employment schemes to alleviate migrant workers' hardships. We call for concerted mobilization of stakeholder ministries, medical colleges, research institutions, and specifically the department of labor to investigate the current status of rehabilitation of the migrant workers who faced hardship during the lockdown, and to work towards developing a public policy for preparedness and mitigation planning for migrant workers during crises.

Ethics approval

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Government Medical College Bhavnagar, India (No. 1029/2021, dated 22-01-2021).

Informed consent

Written informed consent, including permission for the audio recording of the interviews, was obtained from all study participants who agreed to participate.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Author contributions

All authors contributed to the conception, design, definition of intellectual content, literature search, data analysis, manuscript preparation, manuscript editing, and manuscript review. AR and SS conducted in-depth interviews and drafted the first draft of the manuscript. MR, RM, and AM reviewed and edited the manuscript for corrections. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript. All authors will act as guarantors of the research.

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