

## Covid-19 and sanitation work: A call for social work response

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### Abstract

Whilst most of the countries imposed strict lockdowns during Covid-19 pandemic, there were still certain groups of people called sanitation workers fighting from the bottom to ensure cleanliness of our society. These workers have been working round the clock yet they rarely receives recognition and appreciation for saving our lives. They are still marginalized in society due to their inherited nature of work and caste and often face stigma and discrimination. The goal of the paper is to highlight the problems faced by sanitation workers during this pandemic and also to explore the scope of social work intervention in a concise and informative manner. The current study is based in Patna city of Bihar and a sample of 50 sanitary workers was used. Data have been collected from interviews, books and articles. My research findings indicates that a higher percentage of the sanitation workers were not properly trained to handle the Covid-19 pandemic. No special safety instructions were provided to handle the coronavirus. Further, the study reflects that most of the sanitation workers didn't received the protective equipments like masks, gloves, sanitisers and PPE kits who are still carrying out their work amid Covid-19. Social work has also faced a very tough and challenging time during this uncertain scenario. It can provide various intervention services like education, awareness, supervision, medical and legal services to the workers during this pandemic.

**Keywords:** covid-19, discrimination, marginalized, sanitation workers

### Introduction

During the lockdown woes, when the whole world was safely cushioned inside their homes, there were still some group of people called Sanitation workers which continued providing the essential services round the clock with the continuous risk of exposure to Covid-19. These workers being the backbone of our society but still they are ignored and most vulnerable who are fighting from the bottom to visualize their identity. The unprecedented pandemic has further burdened the India's sanitation work. They are working in unhygienic conditions which could cost to their lives as they come in direct contact with several types of wastes including bio-medical wastes. Without social security and safety equipment and protective gear, they are under increased risk and constant threat of exposing them to covid-19. These workers have no "work from home" option and their services still remains on the backseat in the society. There are approximately five million sanitation workers in India who are engaged in the abysmal work of cleaning wastes and public places, rubbish, garbage, dirt, sewers and public toilets. During the covid-19 pandemic, they were working round overtime as frontline warriors to ensure cleanliness and safety of our society but little is known about their contribution and how they are coping with this pandemic. Even after gaining independence, they are still marginalized and covid-19 pandemic has only magnified their challenges and exacerbated their vulnerabilities. In our Indian society, there is a constant taboo of caste discrimination which has made them victims of oppression. Those born in this community are considered agents of pollution due to their background of social hierarchy, based on birth and they are the most oppressed and suppressed class of Indian society-often hated, ostracized, vilified, avoided, by all the other castes and

classes (Akram, 2015) <sup>[1]</sup>. Sanitation workers are doing heroic deeds to make our city clean but still lack due appreciation and motivation despite their significant contributions. In spite of providing essential services to our cities yet their work is not considered equal to India's highest acclaimed profession like doctors, health workers and police officers. On the ground sanitation work is never treated as essential work. They work without safety gear and face discrimination still their life goes on without interrupting their services. There has been long history of ignoring the rights of these sanitation workers and the pandemic has further expanded their health and safety at risk. It is due to their financial crisis and poverty they are helpless to continue their job during the sustained lockdown also. They are facing daunting challenges on regular basis. After the outbreak of pandemic, the roads, street and waste disposal sites are full of discarded masks, gloves, face shields e.t.c which make them more susceptible to the virus. They are recognized as Covid warriors for their fundamental service but are send to the war without proper weapons and such initiatives are mere superficial for them in the real life with only few cases as exceptions. The objectives of this paper is:

1. To gain an understanding of the problems faced by sanitation workers during this Covid-19 pandemic.
2. To explore the social work intervention methods to improve the conditions of these workers during this pandemic.

### The New Normal challenges

The Pandemic has created anxiety all over the world with a sudden shift to different world of course. Many people are falling sick due to infection while many are dying due to covid-19 virus. The world has reduced its activities and

social interaction as a protection to curb the disease. There is panic and fear in the minds of people but still these unsung heroes are winning hearts by offering their unconditional services to the society. Disinfection, sanitation, and sterilization can play a lead role in make the situation normal with a great burden on the sanitation services. In India, mechanization of wastes and garbage is still a problems as proper disposable technology is not available. Further, the trash are not segregated and they are mixed and kept in one bag which makes their work difficult in normal times and the Covid-19 has further added to their complexity and severity to these problems. Those workers residing outskirts of the city use to travel by trains and buses but due to unplanned lockdown they faced lots of were problem while reaching to their workplace. One of the main challenges these workers face that they don't have proper information regarding the Covid-19 affected households. In India, many people are asymptomatic which also make them more vulnerable to the virus. Lack of proper insurance schemes has created fear in the minds of these workers that if they contract the virus who will take care of their families and who will bear the expense of their treatment.

### **Social Work Profession**

Social work originated as voluntary and charitable and services and developed as highly regulated profession. It plays a central role in solving the complex problems of society and intervenes to make a positive difference. It helps the people in distress, destitution and deprivation and above all those in need. Its main aim is to make a person self-dependent and self-reliant and also explores the causal factors behind the problems and tries to solve them in a more scientific way by integrating its knowledge, skills and methods while dealing with them. It is basically a helping process to maintain the harmonious function of the society. Friedlander (1951) defined, "Social work is a professional service, based on scientific knowledge and skill in human relations, which assists individuals, alone or in groups, to obtain social and personal satisfaction and independence". This definition is considered as one of the most comprehensive definitions of social work given by Friedlander. According to him, Social work is a profession like other professions, through which a trained social worker with scientific knowledge and outlook in handling human relations, helps individuals and groups to have social and personal satisfaction.

Professional social work is focused on problem solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve. Social work utilizes a variety of skills, techniques, and activities consistent with its holistic focus on persons and their environments. Social work interventions range from primarily person-focused psychosocial processes to involvement in social policy, planning and development (Jacob, 2016) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Human rights and social justice are the core principles of social work profession. This profession strives to liberate vulnerable and oppressed groups and communities in order to build socially inclusive society.

### **Social Work Response**

There is no doubt that Covid-19 pandemic has created fear among the people and halted our lives. It not only caused deaths of people but also disrupted the social events as well

as economy. Among these people, the most affected are socially excluded and vulnerable communities whose world is suddenly hit by the pandemic severely. There need to be someone who can voice up for their plight they are facing and bring light to their contribution to society. In this situation, the need for social work intervention arises as the resources are not available to them and can act as mediator between state organizations and the sanitation workers. It wouldn't be wrong to say that that the Pandemic has challenged the social work profession core values like social justice, human rights and dignity also. Social work can provide frontline role to fight against this Covid-19 pandemic by supporting these vulnerable communities. It can contribute its knowledge, skills to assist these workers, their families and communities. At the same time, the Social work professionals have to maintain their health and well-being in this changing scenario. Social work education have many challenges, but with the effort of educators, field practitioners, and social work trainees it is turning towards to meet the local needs and adopt local techniques to resolve issues of an individual, the group and the community by adopting Community development skills (C.U, 2016)

Sanitation workers are victims of old age atrocities, discrimination, humiliation and maltreatment which is prevalent in our society even after independence. These are the groups who needs help and support from the government as well as non-governmental organisations for their survival and inclusion in the mainstream society. Social Workers deals with the social issues with their expertise ans skills to solve the problems faced by individual, groups and communities. The professionals need to have sound knowledge of intervention methods as these methods differ according to the nature and complexity of the situation. They can provide broad range of services such as counselling, advocacy and educational programs. Social work intervention also include concrete services like providing financial support, material aid, supervision, medical services as well as legal services. Problems of these workers are multifaceted in nature, so the social work professionals approach should be different for different problems by analysing the extent and complexity of the problem. Their goal is to provide protection to the vulnerables by optimising resources for them. The main aim of the services should be to establish equal oppurtunities which are open to every community irrespective of their social position. Strategies should be made to empower these communities and increase their confidence. Effective social work intervention helps in devoloping sensitivity towards these marginalised groups and strives to eliminate discrimination and oppression towards these groups with main aim to bring equality in our society.

Social Work Professionals have played a significant role in reflecting the actual pproblems and issues at the grass root level and to readdress these problems to bring a change in the society. The role of social workers as change agents has gained much more recognition and acceptance by the society.

### **Essential Role of Social work professional:**

1. Social work professionals should avoid spread of misinformation during this crisis and remain up to date regarding the protocol and resources provided by the Government.

2. It can act as educator and train these workers about the virus and reduce stigma.
3. It should ensure that free boarding, protective gear, soaps, sanitisers, reusable masks, food and clean water is made available to these workers.
4. By providing personalized guidance social workers can reduce anxiety and other concerns to a great extent arising due to pandemic and also by providing direct support these workers.
5. The aim of the social workers is to bring equality in society by advocating their rights and also to develop sensitivity towards their condition and minimize discrimination and oppression.
6. These workers are always underpaid and social workers should come forward to advocate for providing their salary hike and also make sure that they get it on time.
7. It should encourage these workers to frequently hand wash, maintain social distancing and also wear mask to check the spread of infection.
8. It should guide the workers to get themselves tested and also address their financial issues.
9. It should motivate them to deal with this pandemic and also manage their feelings and emotions.

### Study Area

Patna being the capital is the largest city of Bihar in terms of density and population. Rapid Urbanization without proper planning has created burden of waste management problems. It is among the worst cities in case of sanitation and hygiene. The trash is visible and piled at every corners of the locality which makes the situation worst for the sanitation workers and the Covid-19 pandemic has further amplified the situation.

### Methodology

The research was designed to collect data from primary and secondary sources. The information was collected through semi structured interviews from 50 participants from the city Patna employed in public departments, municipalities and local government as well as from the privately employed workers. All the participants were Hindu males belonging to Valmiki castes. The data was collected by the author who visited the workplace of sanitation workers, houses of them and interacted with them to gain an insight into their problems during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important in this Covid-19 pandemic, that the human rights of these sanitation workers are protected in terms of access to health, safety and working conditions.

### Major Findings

#### Awareness about Covid-19, its symptoms and preventive measures

- Most Sanitation Workers were aware about Covid-19 virus and its severity. 95% of them knew that it is transmitted through coughing, sneezing, and coming in contact with the Covid-19 infected person.
- Most of them were aware that maintain social distancing, frequently handwashing, sanitizing, regularly wearing masks can curb the virus to a great extent. However, they came across the information through media.
- While asked about the symptoms of Covid-19, mostly replied that fever, coughing and breathing problem are the main symptoms of Covid-19.

### Proper Guidance and Training

- A higher percentage of these workers said that no proper guidance and special training is provided to tackle the virus.
- While only 5% said that their employers provided verbal instructions while working in this pandemic. Most of them lack the formal training and proper guidance.

### Safety Instructions

- No safety instructions were provided to handle the bio-medical wastes from the quarantine wards, hospitals, as well as from containment zones.
- 97% of these workers were not aware how to identify and handle the biomedical wastes as it contained the trash contaminated with body fluids from suspected patients, quarantine and isolation wards.

### Provision of personal protective equipments

- Those workers employed in government offices got only basic equipments like masks, gloves, soaps and sanitizers for their use. However, 30% of the workers complained that initially they got the mask and other protective equipments which were limited but as the pandemic continued, its availability also decreased and now nobody even cares. The Masks provided were not reusable and of poor quality which can't be used for longer period. However, within the offices they were having the facilities of hand washing and sanitizers but on the worksite these facilities were not available.

### Financial securities

- Most of the workers are underpaid and have limited amount of income to continue their expenses. One thing this pandemic did Good for them was that they got the salaries on time in their account which motivated them a lot to continue their job.
- Most of the sanitation workers working in home has lost their job due to the lockdown as no body preferred to take their services at that time. They are under constant threat and fear how to feed their families and children.

### Insurance and Health checkup

- Those workers employed in government offices were provided health checkups and screening and were provided with free medical benefits.
- While 80% of the workers said that they were not provided with regular health checkup but undergone thermal screening only at their workplace.
- However, no insurance was provided to them in case of medical emergencies, infection or death which is a major concern for them. Mostly were the sole bread winner of their family and they fear that who will take care of their family members if they die by contracting the virus.
- None of the private workers has health insurance.

In Patna, some of the initiatives like painting murals on the building were done to encourage and pay tribute to the corona warriors including doctors, police officers, delivery personnel and sanitation workers. It was also reported that a sanitation worker named Ram Babu from Indira Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences was the first to get vaccinated

against coronavirus disease. Though, it was a very good step to recognize and appreciate the work of these warriors yet a long way to go.

### **Key suggestions**

1. These workers should be provided with adequate information about covid-19 virus and the specific training should be provided to respond to this pandemic in a better way.
2. Government should provide Covid-19 social security schemes in case of infection, health hazards or death. They should be provided proper free health checkups, and access to health insurance.
3. Government should make protocol to handle the hazardous medical discards and wastes created by the pandemic
4. Proper PPE kits, gloves, masks, sanitizers, face shield should be made available to them.
5. In case of handling of biomedical wastes from quarantine centers and isolation wards, proper guidance should be provided for taking precautions.
6. Appropriate vaccination centers should be setup for these frontline workers.

### **Conclusion**

Despite being motivated as frontline warriors yet these sanitation workers are at the bottom of our priorities fighting for their recognition and acceptance within the society. The false promises and hope of equal society has led to the introspection of our society mindset and yet again proved how caste and class continued to shape the public policy. The caste-based legacy is deeply entrenched in our conscience which needs to be addressed and changed. These invisible and overlooked heroes should be accepted to the mainstream society with dignity they deserve and the taboo associated with their caste need to be destroyed completely. Social Work has a long history of intending and assisting individuals, groups and communities in dealing and solving their personal and social problems permanently in a systematic process. It also deals with the treatment of psycho-social problems with the scientific solution. Thus, Social work can play a very important and challenging role by advocating for their rights and dignity. It can help in identifying their problems and develop appropriate strategies on how to solve them. Also, it can act as mediator between the government agencies and the workers to get their voices heard by the concerned authorities and get the resources available for them. The Social work can shift its knowledge and skills to practice and make them aware of their human rights and laws and also assist them in enabling change when needed.

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