

IN A GLANCE: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Experiences of Frontline Workers in Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh during the COVID-19 Pandemic

SUMMARY

- Anganwadi Workers (AWWs), Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) form the locus of healthcare and nutrition delivery in rural India.
- From November 2020-January 2021, we carried out a survey on the experiences of the FLWs in two districts each of Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan.
- Among our findings was a slowdown in health and nutrition-related public services.
- The roles and responsibilities of FLWs also saw an increase. As many as 83 per cent respondents reported working an additional 3 hours daily. They were performing COVID-19 pandemic and regular job tasks.
- FLWs felt adequate training on COVID-19 was provided. As many as 99 per cent were trained or received information on at least one COVID-19-related activity.
- Incentives and motivation levels, however, saw mixed response.



BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Approximately 13.3 lakh Anganwadi Workers (AWWs), 9.3 lakh Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), and 2.3 lakh Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) across the country (RTI response, 2021; Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2019) serve as the first port of call for primary health and nutrition services. With the advent of COVID-19, these Frontline Workers (FLWs) have found themselves at the forefront of combating the pandemic.

Their revised responsibilities have included screening for COVID-19, contact tracing, communication of preventative measures, adapting nutrition-related programmes, and doorstep delivery of maternal and child health services.

Through its Inside Districts series, the Accountability Initiative (AI) at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) has been documenting the oft-overlooked stories of government functionaries at the frontline of the COVID-19 response. Under a research grant from the Azim Premji University, we delved further. The overall objectives of this study conducted between November 2020-January 2021, were:

- To understand the evolving role of FLWs post COVID-19, including the impact on non-COVID work. Within this, we aimed to understand overall barriers and facilitators of performance.
- To gain insights about processes and best practices related to training, implementation, and supportive supervision.

We hope that these insights will augment ongoing government work, and can be applied to future crises where FLWs are heavily involved.

Overall Research Questions for Our Study

Domain	Overarching Research Questions
Means <i>Are FLWs capable of performing key responsibilities?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do FLWs have all the resources (infrastructure, PPE, support, and so on) to carry out their work? • Have FLWs been trained on new COVID-19-related tasks?
Motives <i>Are FLWs motivated to perform key responsibilities?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do FLWs feel driven to perform new and/or additional tasks? • Are any incentives being provided for new tasks? If so, are incentives delivered and adequate? • Are FLWs receiving supportive supervision?
Opportunities <i>Are FLWs provided the opportunity to perform?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What challenges - workload, community, personal and others - are FLWs experiencing at present? • How has FLW workload changed in COVID-19 times? What are their new roles and responsibilities? • How are FLWs balancing COVID-19-related responsibilities with existing scheme-specific responsibilities?

Geographical Location

The study was carried out in two states – Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan. The states were chosen purposively given the existing variance in performance on health and nutrition indicators. While Rajasthan appears to be lagging behind in these outcomes, Himachal Pradesh shows a comparatively better performance.

Within each state, two sample districts were chosen based on inter-district differences in socio-economic status. These were Jaipur and Udaipur in Rajasthan, and Kangra and Solan in Himachal Pradesh.



Credit: Shriram BN/EP5

Research Methods

The study uses a mixed-methods design. While primarily a quantitative survey was carried out, qualitative case studies have also been conducted to document positive variance in FLW performance and enrich the quantitative data.

Achieved Quantitative Sample for the Study

State	District	Sample of AWWs	Sample of ANMs	Sample of ASHAs	Total
Rajasthan	Jaipur	34	34	33	101
	Udaipur	37	35	35	107
Himachal Pradesh	Kangra	0*	37	37	74
	Solan	0*	34	35	69
Total		71	140	140	351

*Sample attrition for AWWs from Kangra and Solan districts, Himachal Pradesh due to lack of government permissions for conducting the survey.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Roles and Responsibilities of FLWs



- Activities such as antenatal check-ups, immunisation, distribution of supplements continued during the lockdown, but at a lower frequency.
- **90 per cent of FLWs surveyed reported an increase in the number of people in their work area, which was largely due to the return of migrant workers and their families.**
- **Over 50 per cent FLWs reported that their responsibilities had increased, which on average meant an additional two to three hours of work per day.**

Training



- FLWs felt that they had been adequately trained or provided information on COVID-19-related activities.
- However, gaps in training for certain activities such as coordination with other FLWs and departments, managing stigma and discrimination around the disease, and COVID-19 sample collection remained.
 - Not only did a smaller proportion of FLWs across both states reported being trained on these activities, but even the ones who were trained reported them to be inadequate.
- For the majority of AWWs, training happened via WhatsApp, whereas in-person training was held for around 50 per cent of ANMs and ASHAs.

Resources



- **92 per cent received at least one Personal Protective Equipment resource in Rajasthan, and 100 per cent received at least one resource in Himachal Pradesh. Masks, sanitisers, and gloves were the most widely received resources.**

- Around 70 per cent of FLWs said that beneficiaries reached out to them for COVID-19-related issues such as the provision of PPE or for health advice. Across all FLWs, 37 per cent reported that they were not able to assist citizens with COVID-19-related issues, largely due to a shortage of resources, followed by lack of money.

Incentives and Motivations

Financial Incentives



- 96 per cent of ASHAs reported having received monetary incentives for COVID-19-related tasks in Himachal Pradesh, compared to 74 per cent in Rajasthan.
 - Cross-state differences could also be observed in the mean payment amounts, with the amount in Himachal Pradesh (around ₹6,900) being over two times that in Rajasthan (around ₹3,300).
- During qualitative interviews, it emerged that an important aspect affecting motivation was the receipt of remuneration, and this factor was particularly significant for single women or FLWs whose husbands were unemployed.
- No such incentives were announced for AWWs or ANMs in either of the two states.

Non-Financial Incentives



- Less than two-thirds (58 per cent) of FLWs reported being recognised for their contribution.
- The most common form of public recognition stated was praise by supervisors, followed by provision of certificates, praise by beneficiaries and Panchayat members. A noteworthy aspect is that recognition from relevant government officials and politicians was quite low.
- Insights from qualitative interviews revealed intrinsic motivators for some FLWs, such as:
 - Feeling a sense of duty to help their communities during the pandemic;
 - A sense of pride in having the knowledge to help community members;
 - A sense of patriotic pride and a desire to serve the community.

Supportive Supervision



- Only 11 per cent of FLWs reported facing challenges with supervision and support. This figure was higher in Himachal Pradesh (17 per cent) compared to Rajasthan (7 per cent).
- Among those that encountered challenges, 80 per cent reported facing pressure for work from their supervisors, and 43 per cent of FLWs reported that they were not getting the help that they needed in carrying out their tasks.
- From the qualitative interviews we found that support received from supervisors was a key motivating factor.
- FLWs felt that the support they received could be improved: having more time to do the given work was reported by 76 per cent of respondents in Himachal Pradesh. Also, meeting the supervisor in person (45 per cent), and having more frequent meetings (43 per cent) were other ways to improve support as per FLWs.

- During the lockdown, FLWs typically contacted their direct supervisors via phone and WhatsApp, and less than 5 per cent FLWs met their supervisors in person. Post lockdown, 30 per cent of FLWs met their supervisors in person instead of speaking via phone, due to the easing of movement restrictions.

Community Challenges



- **A majority of FLWs (70 per cent) faced community challenges.** The major challenges were:
 - A lack of compliance (80 per cent);
 - A lack of trust (57 per cent);
 - Beneficiaries not wanting AWC-related contact (32 per cent).
- Instances of community backlash came through in qualitative discussions, stemming from a fear of community members that they will contract COVID-19 from FLWs, frustration around multiple household surveys and testing, and migrant returnees resisting testing and quarantining.
 - The backlash manifested through verbal abuse, refusal to allow FLWs into their homes, refusal to cooperate with COVID-19 protocols and, in more extreme instances, physical violence.
- **5 per cent FLWs also reported facing violence.** FLWs experienced verbal and physical abuse. In addition, needing to travel long distances for COVID-19 surveys, returning home late in the evening, and the urgency of COVID-19 tasks taking place in the evenings, raised safety concerns.
 - Implicit in this discussion was the fear of gender-based violence, with anecdotes about men ‘misbehaving’ or ‘looking at them unpleasantly’.

Household and Personal Challenges



- The major challenges faced by FLW households were: not being able to visit family and friends (35 per cent), long distance travel restrictions (34 per cent), and unemployment or loss of income during the lockdown (28 per cent).
- The burden of additional household duties that fell on women, was felt equally in both states (reported by 30 per cent of FLWs).
- FLWs feared that they or their families could fall sick. Further, 28 per cent FLWs reported that their families wished to maintain a distance from them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Ensuring FLWs have resources when they require it the most:** FLWs did not always have access to resources such as PPE, mobile phones, and transportation, and often had to supplement these provisions at their own expense. A mechanism to prioritise their requests can be made.
- **Maintaining momentum on technology:** The role played by technology in service delivery has assisted FLWs in adapting to new ways of working. Even as 15 per cent of FLWs felt that the training they received on new online software was inadequate, there is an opportunity to explore the use of technology to enhance communication and other aspects of service delivery in the future.
- **Increase in payment for work done and timely payments:** Providing a mixture of task-based incentives and a base salary could help in providing more financial stability to FLWs. Salaries/honoraria and COVID-19 payments continue to be motivators, and addressing late payment issues could thus influence motivation levels.
- **Reviewing employee circumstances:** Among our findings has been trust on FLWs as a facilitator of their work. Assigning FLWs to areas where they have local community ties so that trust pre-exists can be increased. Moreover, given the long distance they are required to travel and safety issues they are often concerned with, reassigning villages that are easier for them to travel to or adjusting reporting times based on their travel/housework times would help with motivation levels.
- **Augmenting communications with supervisors:** Simple measures such as meeting their supervisors more often, or meeting them in person can help in overcoming issues and maintaining FLW motivation.
- **Building a culture of coordination:** The pandemic period saw high levels of convergence and personal relationships being built with other FLWs. Having frequent support meetings wherein FLWs are given an opportunity to share their insights can provide a platform for experience-based practical learning, and also lead to greater FLW satisfaction.

ABOUT THE ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVE

Accountability Initiative is a research group which has worked since 2008 on strengthening transparency and accountability in governance. We have done this through evidence-based research on state capabilities and factors affecting efficient public services delivery in India.

We are operational in 5 states - Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Our research studies have been multi-sectoral and include studies on budgets, governance processes, and public administration across social sectors like education, health and nutrition, and sanitation.

We are a part of the Centre for Policy Research, one of India's leading public policy think tanks