

# Social Security for Migrant Workers during COVID-19

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The unprecedented public health crisis due to COVID-19 has thrown the vulnerability of migrant construction workers into sharp relief. Most of them are not enrolled in any social protection scheme, and those who are, have been only provided with contingencies. These measures are inadequate to address the multidimensional deprivations and fundamental causes of vulnerability arising due to globalisation and a changing labour market, which has been exacerbated by the current crisis.

The literature on the health and safety of workers in the construction sector emphasises the importance of social security measures in combination with social protection (Comaru and Werna 2013; ILO 2017; Lawrence and Werna 2009; Srivastava and Jha 2014). While it is imperative to draw a distinction between social security and social protection, it is also important to examine whether the applicability of such a concept is only valid during ordinary circumstances and becomes invalid during an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has immediate consequences for the health and lives of the people.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), social protection is a human right and is defined as “the set of policies and programmes designed to reduce and prevent poverty and vulnerability throughout the life cycle” (ILO 2017: xxix). Social protection constitutes one of the four pillars of the “strategic objectives” of the ILO to promote decent work. Also, in recent times, it has been at the centre stage of the political discourse since a majority of the construction workers lack welfare measures or social protection.

Differentiating between social security and social protection becomes important due to increasing insecurities and vulnerabilities of workers in this rapidly changing world of work. It would provide a framework to understand the multidimensional deprivations faced by workers. The term “social security” has been in use for a long time and denotes a range of core provisions to construction sector workers, such as healthcare, compensation due to injury, illness or death, maternity benefits, childcare benefits and old-age pension. Many of these have been diluted over a period of time due to globalisation and changes in the labour market.

Globalisation, accompanied by changing demographics and a shifting labour market, has been one of the key developments of the past two decades. It has led to informalisation and has altered existing employment structures and labour markets. It has generated risk and volatility both at the macro and micro levels. At the micro level, risks are transferred from the employers to the workers through flexible and precarious work, and insecure employment. Private provisioning of healthcare combined with insurance-based health schemes, declining state spending and weakening of labour organisations have diluted the earlier mandatory provisions of social security. All of these are key determinants of the health of workers in the construction sector. Thus, globalisation has affected the provisions of labour welfare and social security, which has had an impact on the health of workers.

## Social Security to Protection

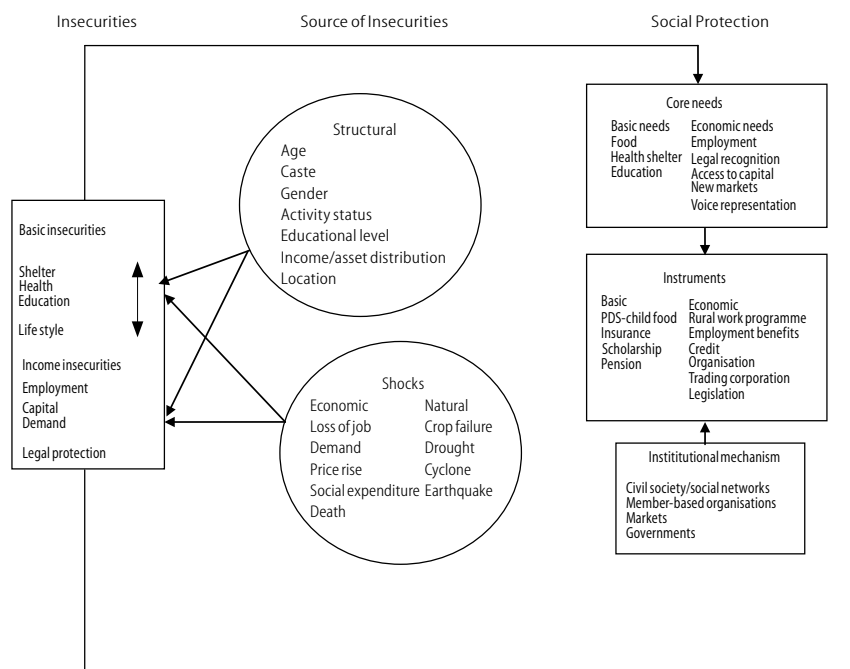
These changes have led to a conceptual shift from social security to social protection where the emphasis has been on human and social development (Lund and Nicholson 2003) with individuals, families, and communities playing a more active role along with a wide range of institutions entrusted with the responsibility of providing social protection.

Drèze and Sen (1991) had developed a broader conception of social protection by distinguishing between its two aspects—“protection” and “promotion” (Unni and Rani 2002). The term protection refers to providing basic conditions of living and protecting workers from a sudden economic crisis or recession. The promotional aspect is a more expansive dimension of social protection and targets eradicating issues, such as poverty, that have persisted for decades by “enhancing normal living conditions and dealing with regular, often persistent, deprivations” (Drèze and Sen 1991 as cited in Unni and Rani 2002: 2).

In addition, social protection has both micro and macro dimensions. The macro dimension refers to security at the national level or at the level of a region as a whole, while the micro dimension means that individuals and households are

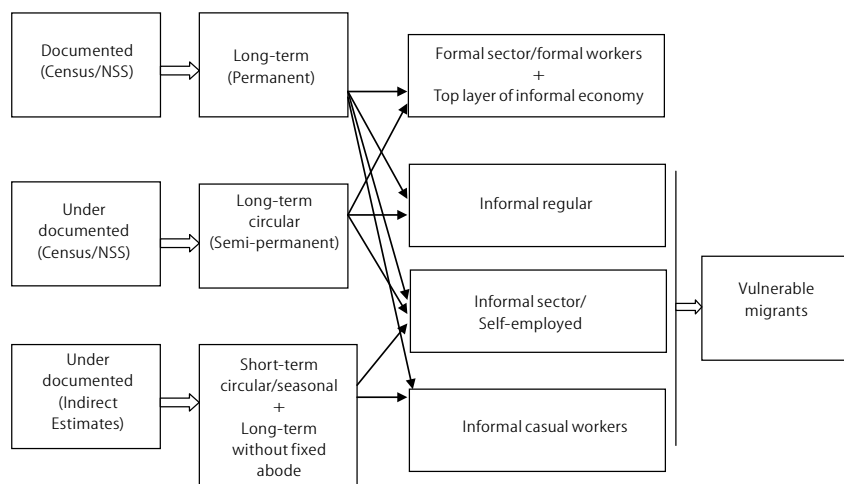
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**Figure 1: Components of Social Protection**



Source: Unni and Rani (2003: 131).

**Figure 2: Internal Migrants: Documented and Underdocumented**



Source: IHD India (2020).

secured. Security at the national level or of a region as a whole does not guarantee security to individuals or households (Unni and Rani 2003: 129).

Social protection covers certain core needs and economic securities (Figure 1). Core needs refer to basic securities that include income security, food security, shelter security, education security, health security and household and family-related benefits. Economic securities include structure of employment, legal status and legal entitlements and access to capital. The distinction between

basic and economic securities provides a framework to better visualise social protection.

**Limitations of Social Security**

The traditional conception of social security that only covered contingencies is no longer sufficient in the present age of globalisation where workers are faced with multidimensional deprivation. COVID-19 has highlighted the limitations of social security and exposed the conceptual flaws in the implementation of social protection policies for informal workers.

Informal sector workers in developing countries like India need social protection that not only secures their basic needs but also insulates them against economic insecurities. Growing income insecurity and vulnerability in the informal sector necessitates expanding the scope of social protection by including economic security besides basic security.

The approach towards social protection should promote income security and eliminate risks in addition to coping with risks. It requires a complete shift in the prevailing strategy from risk minimisation to protecting existing income to raising the income of informal workers.

Workers' insecurities in the informal sector fall into two categories. One is the random shock in the form of illness or premature mortality, leading to a health shock due to catastrophic health expenditure and loss of job that affects households from time to time. Random shocks could also include natural calamities, such as epidemics, cyclones or earthquakes. Orthodox social security measures were directed to deal with these kinds of insecurities. Other insecurities come from the structural features of households that remain constant to a large extent throughout their lives, such as age, gender, caste, marital status and ownership of assets (Unni and Rani 2002). Besides these, one of the most important structural features is whether they are a salaried worker, a casual worker or a self-employed worker (Unni and Rani 2002). This is an extremely important feature of workers in the informal economy, which is a highly heterogeneous group but have always been seen as a monolithic working class. Both random shocks and structural features

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influence basic and economic insecurities. However, the latter is pertinent to address economic insecurities as structural features determine economic insecurities among informal workers. Thus, social protection schemes should have two objectives: first, to provide protective security that negates the effect of random shocks, and second, promotional security that deals with the issues of fear and insecurity due to any calamity.

The ongoing pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of migrants, especially in the informal sectors. In India, migrant labourers have been hard hit by lockdowns and containment strategies. Labour circulation provides flexible labour, which allows for the intensification of capital accumulation. While the long-term permanent migrants are documented (Figure 2) and covered under social protection, it is the long- and short-term circular and seasonal migrants who are the most vulnerable. These are the group of workers who are either self-employed or casual workers and are least protected. People belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, who constitute a substantial proportion of the short-term circular migrants and lack a foothold in cities, have been the worst affected. They are the ones who are non-citizens in the big cities and are weak citizens in their native states or villages (Srivastava and Jha 2014).

The policies of social protection are conceptualised and designed keeping in view the workforce that is documented. A substantial section of the workforce, primarily in the construction sector, who constitute one of the most vulnerable segments, is out of this. Therefore, existing social protection policies are weaker or non-existent for these circular migrants as is evident from the latest unrest of migrants in the major cities of the country due to lack of food and shelter as well as the loss of livelihood. Lakhs of migrants have taken to the roads to demand the basic minimum for their existence and, in many cases, have been forced to walk back to their native places in the absence of any transportation facilities.

While the most immediate concern for them is food, shelter and proper

transportation, the long-term impacts would be on their livelihoods or the lack thereof. It is high time that the government reflects on their policies of social protection, fundamental issues of conceptual flaws, and its implementation in the view of the mayhem being created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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