



**Frontline Workers' Solidarity Campaign**  
Feminist Policy Collective and allies

**Briefing letter for Hon. Members of Parliament**

8<sup>th</sup> March 2021

**Re: Call to Action for International Women's Day 2021 ~**

**“Recognize rights of community-based frontline and scheme-based women workers”**

Respected Member of Parliament,

As the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts, it has become very clear that the pandemic has triggered enormous stress on an under-resourced public health system, and overstretched women frontline workers such as ASHA and Anganwadi Workers/Helpers.

The public health system faces an absolute crisis of availability and distribution of health workers; which has been worsened through systematic disinvestment in strengthening the health system and its workforce. The poor budgetary resources mean that the healthcare and nutrition services are heavily dependent on underpaid volunteers hired for the implementation of Schemes. Crucial roles of health, nutrition and care work in the community are managed by frontline women ‘volunteers’ who are not recognized as ‘workers’: the ASHAs, cooks in the School Mid-day Meal programme and the older cadre of Anganwadi Workers (AWW) and Helpers who run community centres for supplementary nutrition and part-daycare for children. Rough estimates suggest that there are close to 7 million Scheme-based workers in the country, including 2.8 million Anganwadi workers and helpers; 2.5 million mid-day meal cooks and helpers; and close to a million ASHAs.

This shifting of the burden on to precarious informal workers undermines women’s economic empowerment, and India’s ability to reduce malnutrition rates in the country. Malnutrition continues to be a pressing concern for India. The recently released National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data shows alarming indications of an increase in malnutrition in the period 2014-19 with nearly half of our children anaemic, stunted, wasted and underweight. Despite their significant role in public service delivery, women involved in scheme-based work are denied proper contracts, decent work conditions, most social security benefits and remuneration.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown up the glaring gaps in public health systems when the only force available on the ground were community-based frontline women workers. These women workers are pressed into service, sometimes appearing as the only face of the state health system in certain areas. During COVID they have been pressed into additional roles where they were sent into surveillance and tracking duty; often at great personal risk, working longer hours, facing community anger, even violence. They have been sent out at risk with almost no protective equipment, and no recognition for their valuable labour. Despite the hard work they put in, their regular payments were stalled for many months, and they have not been properly compensated for the high risk and extra burden of work.

Given these circumstances, we the undersigned, demand that women at the frontlines be kept at the heart of a COVID-recovery plan as they are critical in strengthening last mile quality health and nutrition services to India’s underserved. As we move into the recovery phase of the pandemic, it may be worthwhile exploring longer term solutions around crisis management that can potentially tackle this cluster of issues as well as bolster women’s economic agency.

These women should no longer be termed ‘volunteers’ but should be formally recognized as workers, provided regular wages not less than minimum wages, and provided with all social security and workers’ benefits, which will also advance women’s economic empowerment. They should also be formally recognized for their huge contribution during the pandemic as Corona Warriors.

On **Women's Day 8<sup>th</sup> March 2021**, we demand that the Government:

1. **Recognize and formalize of jobs** of community-based frontline workers
2. Provide a **living wage as remuneration for the frontline workers** in delivering essential services (above the minimum wages now Rs.18,000 per month)
3. Ensure 100% enrolment for all frontline workers in all existing **social security schemes**, including the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY)
4. Extend **maternity benefits**, such as Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), to all frontline workers without any disqualifying conditions
5. Ensure **free health coverage** for all frontline workers and their families
6. Give due recognition to frontline workers, particularly Anganwadi workers, Anganwadi helpers and ASHAs as **Corona Warriors** given the important role played during the pandemic
7. Ensure **appropriate PPE** (personal protective equipment) kits are made available to all frontline workers to prevent contracting other communicable diseases and priority **vaccination**
8. Address and prevent **violence and harassment** against frontline workers
9. Allocate **5% of the GDP to health sector** and enact a legislation for right to **universal healthcare**
10. Enhance the allocations for the **National Crèche Scheme; Anganwadi Centres and AWCs cum crèches should function for a full day** with well-paid and trained workers picking up various shift duties
11. Create a **database and provide disaggregated data** on ASHAs, Anganwadi workers and helpers across India
12. Make the **ICDS and National Health Mission permanent programmes** of the Government, and ensure universal coverage with adequate budget allocations;

We request your support in this solidarity campaign.

We sincerely hope that you will personally intervene in the matter and ensure these demands are met.

Thank you.

On behalf of,

**The Frontline Workers' Solidarity Campaign**  
Of the Feminist Policy Collective and Allies.

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