



Returning to Chhattisgarh through the pandemic

Findings from a survey of return migrants

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Abstract

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, migrants across India left their homes and returned to their native regions and villages. How have these migrants fared, and what can policy do to ensure they can access vital safety nets and eventually return to work? And how have efforts to combat the spread of Covid-19, such as the rapid establishment of local centres to quarantine return migrants, worked overall?

Keywords

Migrants, Covid-19

From May 29 through July 7, 2020, EPoD India at KREA University and Indus Action partnered with the Government of Chhattisgarh to collect data from migrants returning to their rural homes in Chhattisgarh to support the state's Covid-19 pandemic response efforts. The teams conducted phone surveys to understand conditions at local quarantine centres in rural Chhattisgarh, where most migrants stayed prior to returning to their homes, and to understand migrant well-being. Feedback from the surveys was conveyed to district officials to ensure they addressed issues identified in the surveys.

Overall, the teams reached out to over 27,000 migrants and surveyed 12,407¹ of them. The surveys, which lasted 7-8 minutes on average, collected feedback on 5,137 quarantine centres across 26 districts, so that an average of between 2 and 3 migrants reported on the conditions at each quarantine centre.²

Quarantine Centres in Chhattisgarh

To ensure migrants did not spread Covid-19 upon their return to their rural villages, the Government of Chhattisgarh established approximately 21,000 quarantine centres across 11,000 Gram Panchayats of 27 districts. Quarantine centres were primarily set up at schools, Anganwadi Centres, or community halls in the panchayat. A nodal officer, responsible for maintaining basic standards of cleanliness, and providing food and amenities, was appointed for each quarantine

¹ Sample sizes shown in figures throughout this memo are typically less than this number because we exclude "Don't Knows" from responses, and some respondents did not complete the entire survey. Responses have also been reweighted to reflect the actual division*gender composition of migrant returnees registered in the government's database. Reweighting does not qualitatively affect the results presented here.

² Some migrants participated in a longer survey that explored more about their work, access to safety nets, and well-being. Results of this longer survey are forthcoming.



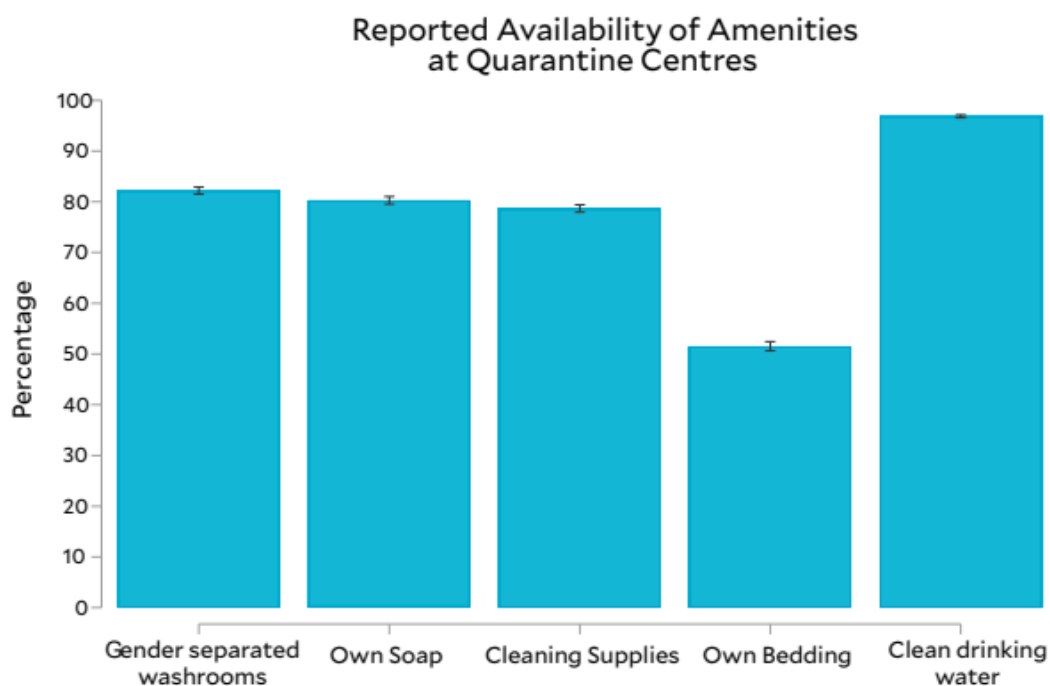
centre from the Gram Panchayat itself. The state government issued directives regarding provision of amenities at the centre, available in the appendix.

97% of surveyed migrants reported having stayed at a quarantine centre, 80% of which were situated in their own panchayats. The survey found that quarantine centres functioned quite well overall. Migrants broadly reported favourably on conditions at the centres, with 95% saying that the centre was being cleaned every day. In most of these cases, migrants reported cleaning the centre themselves, in line with government guidelines. Migrants were also largely able to abide by guidelines on social distancing, with 89% reporting being able to do so at all times.

Migrants reported on a variety of quarantine centre amenities (see Figure 1); most had drinking water, gender separated washrooms, and soap and cleaning supplies. Furthermore, reports of available amenities improved over time, suggesting the centres were increasingly equipped to support returnees.

These improvements were not an accident, but in part due to strong oversight and follow-up by the Government of Chhattisgarh, notably the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development. The state set up a dedicated cell to coordinate with districts to look into issues raised through the surveys, particularly food shortages, which were noted in daily reports to senior officials. The districts, under the CEO Zilla Parishad, appointed nodal officers to check into specific issues uncovered in the surveys. The nodal officer ensured the issues were resolved and reported back to the state on results.

Figure 1: The reported availability of amenities at Quarantine Centres



Responses from 11,938 returning migrants



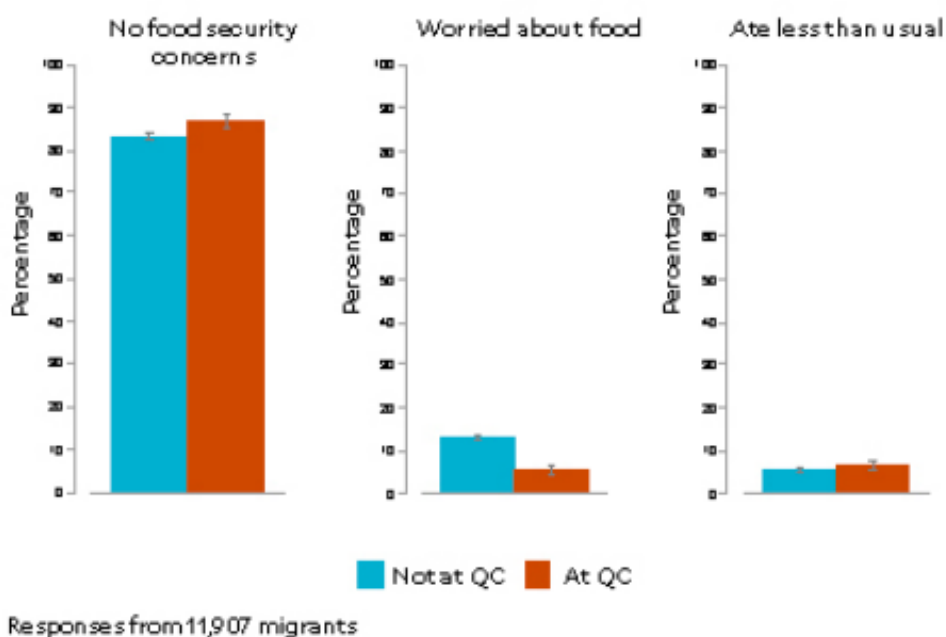
About Chhattisgarh’s returning migrants

Returning migrant respondents were fairly young, with 61% of those surveyed under the age of 30, and 94% under age 45. Just over two in three migrants were males. 48% were OBCs, 25% were SC, and 22% were ST.

30% had arrived from Maharashtra; another 13% came from Telangana, 11% from Gujarat, and 10% from Uttar Pradesh, suggesting migrants from Chhattisgarh were employed all across the country. Most migrants returned to centrally located districts including Bemetra (19%), Janjgir Champa (19%), Bilaspur (14%), and Rajnandgaon (10%). Over four in five had been employed in non-agricultural work prior to returning to Chhattisgarh.

Migrants reported relatively good levels of food security and access to services: 6% reported eating less than normal in the past week, and 12% reported they were worried that food would run out, levels of food insecurity that are significantly lower than those of a similar survey of rural women from Raipur that the EPoD India team recently conducted. The 16% of migrants reporting they were still staying at quarantine centres when they were surveyed reported being less worried about food than those living at home (see Figure 2); this is in line with migrant reports that 83% of centres provided cooked food or rations and supplies.

Figure 2: Migrants’ reports of food insecurity



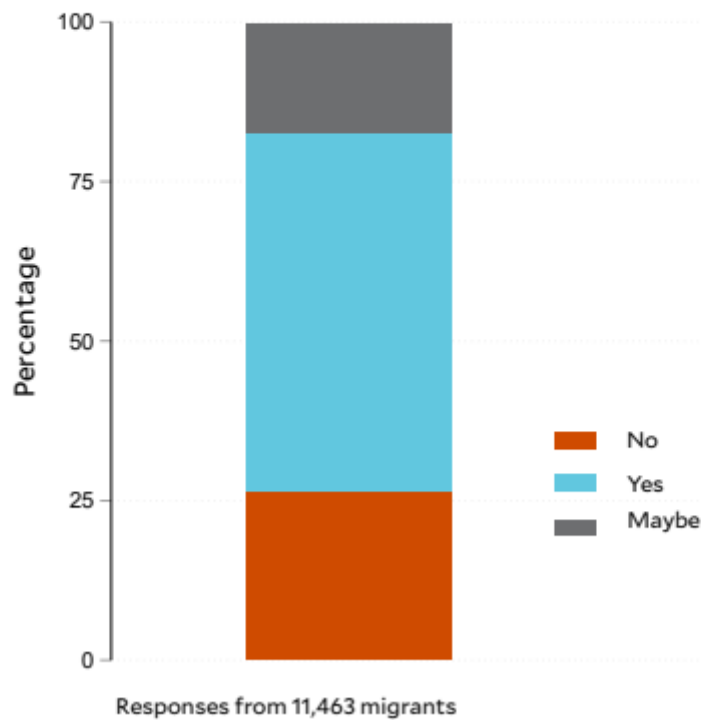
Migrants also reported on whether they were facing shortages at the time of the survey. Migrants who were no longer at quarantine centres were more likely to report shortages in basic supplies than those who were still staying there, indicating that migrants could be more vulnerable after leaving their quarantine centres.³ In such a scenario, keeping track of migrants’ food security even after they have returned to their homes could be helpful to ensure their well-being.



When asked about harassment faced, 93% of migrants surveyed reported not experiencing any difficulty or harassment as they returned home. Of those reporting any difficulty, most reported being refused services or entry into villages.

Migrants also reported on whether they thought they would be able to return to the jobs they held prior to the nationwide lockdown (see Figure 3). 56% of those who were previously working thought they would be able to return to their pre-lockdown jobs, and 17% thought they might be able to. Agricultural workers were most optimistic about returning to work. Similar numbers thought they would be able to return to work and wanted to return to work.

Figure 3: Migrants' abilities to return to work

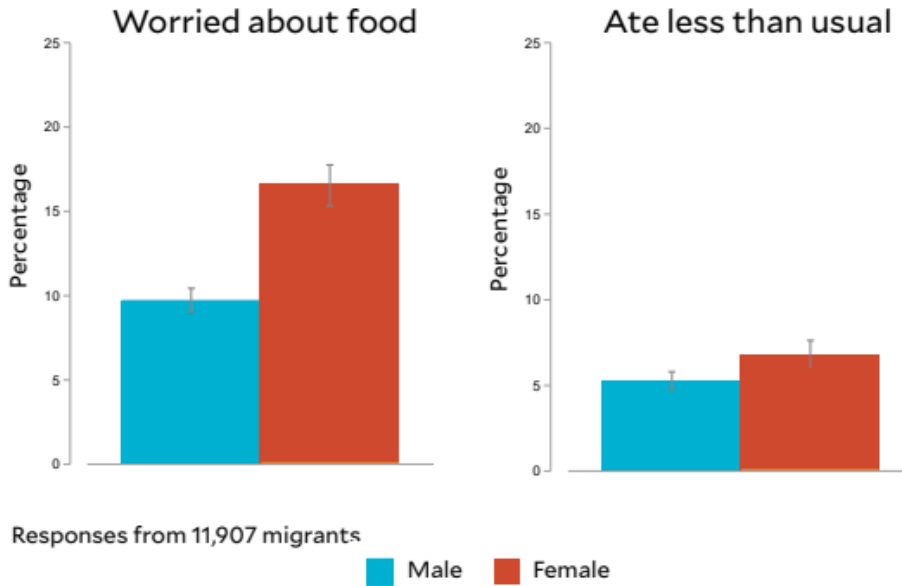


Female migrant well-being and returning to work

Concerningly, survey reports suggest that female migrants have fared worse than males on several critical measures of well-being: First, female migrants reported worse food security levels than males (see figure 4): 7% of women, compared to 5% of men, reported eating less than normal in the past week. Among those not reporting eating less, women also were more worried than men that they would run out of food soon. 17% of women reported feeling this way as opposed to 10% of men.

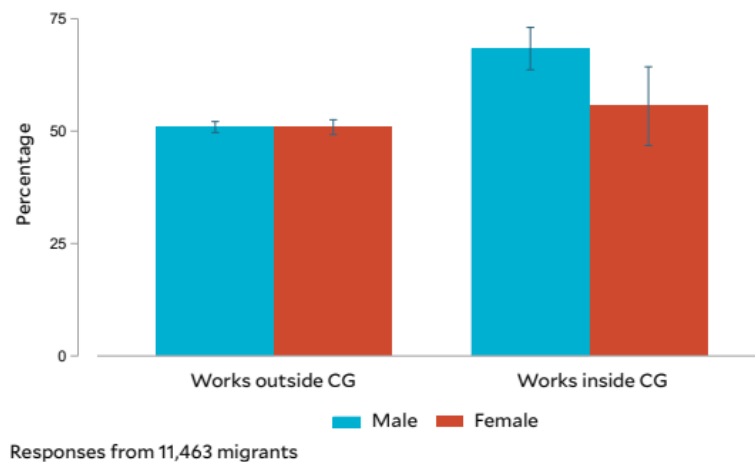


Figure 4: Migrants' reports of food insecurity by gender



Second, women that had been working in Chhattisgarh prior to the pandemic are likely to not think they can return to their job (see Figure 5). This suggests that state policies targeted to encourage and support women's labour market re-entry may be particularly useful, and can ensure that women aren't left out of recovery efforts.

Figure 5: Migrants' abilities to work by state and gender



As the situation continues to evolve, migrants will try to find jobs, some locally and others externally. During this time, it will be important to continue to maintain Covid-19 prevention



efforts alongside tracking and understanding these individuals' well-being, access to safety nets and jobs, so that targeted policies can support Covid-19 prevention and recovery efforts. Specific policies that support women's access to safety nets and labour force re-entry may be especially important to the long-term well-being of Chhattisgarhi migrants.

The state's previous approach of linking real-time data from migrant surveys with targeted follow-ups of quarantine centres worked well to ensure centres functioned properly and migrants were well-supported. A similar approach to ongoing Covid-19 prevention and economic recovery efforts—whether linked to Covid-19 prevention, or access to healthcare, rations, MGNREGA work, skilling, and other social protection, will likely yield similar benefits.

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