

# Civil Society Responses to Covid: Two cases<sup>1</sup>

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**SHORT REPORT**  
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<sup>1</sup> This short report is an amalgamation of two separate Covid-related reports prepared for Bhumika Women's Collective and Doosra Dashak. These two detailed reports will be available shortly on our websites.

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## List of Abbreviations

ANM	Auxiliary Nursing Midwife
ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
BWC	Bhumika Women's Collective
CBOs	Community-based Organisations
CBPS	Centre for Budget and Policy Studies
DD	Doosra Dashak
FED	Foundation for Education and Development
GVPS	Gender Violence in Public Spaces
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation

## 1. Introduction

Whether in personal or abstract terms, we all know or have experienced the way in which one of the biggest health emergency crises triggered by Covid-19, has had severe social and economic consequences all over the world. In India, it has exposed the limitations of the public health systems and has deepened existing structural inequalities across caste, class, gender, sexuality, ableness, and religion. The measures that were taken to counter the pandemic (such as the nation-wide lockdown) also exposed the combined effects of the vulnerabilities of the informal economy, entrenched poverty, and minimal social protection mechanisms on the most marginalised among us. During this terrible time, many grassroots-based organisations stepped in to help communities in distress, and despite the physical, social, and financial restrictions, have provided various relief measures to vulnerable populations. Two of the organisations who did this was Bhumika Women's Collective (BWC) and Doosra Dashak (DD).

### 1.1. Profile of the organisations

#### 1.1.1. Bhumika Women's Collective

Bhumika Women's Collective (BWC) started in 1993 in Hyderabad as an organisation that was dedicated to producing and printing stories that focused on women's lives. As BWC started to grow and understand women's needs and requirements, it started a helpline for women experiencing violence, and established support centres to provide legal and psychological counseling to women in distress in both Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. In 2016, it also started working with women's collectives in rural areas in Karimnagar and Siddipet districts in Telangana to revive and sustain women's federations. BWC also provides gender sensitization trainings to various stakeholders in the justice process including the police, the judiciary, other NGOs, media personnel, community based organisations (CBOs) and volunteers. Advocacy efforts are also bolstered by the training of the paralegal volunteers in urban spaces who can help communities negotiate with legal and justice authorities in case of emergency. Because of these deep connections and networks that BWC has built over the past few decades with the community, and various facets of the State, BWC was able to leverage their knowledge and relationships within this ecosystem to respond to unprecedented crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 1.1.2. Doosra Dashak

The parent organisation of Doosra Dashak (DD) is the Foundation for Education and Development (FED) which is a public charitable trust established by five renowned educationists. Conceptualised by one of the founders, Shri Anil Bordia, Doosra Dashak was established by FED in 2001 for the express purpose of providing holistic and integrated education for adolescent children and to facilitate a new social order that would be free of any discrimination. The methodology that they employed to do this was to use an ecosystem approach by which they work with all structures, institutions and people that influence and effect an adolescent's life. Currently, DD works in 9 blocks and 7 districts of Rajasthan. The blocks are different in terrain and geography, have diverse communities and therefore, have different implementation contexts. While we cannot go into all of the activities done by DD, the major activities can be categorised into community mobilization, organisational development (or collectivizing communities), livelihoods, continued education, capacity building and networking and advocacy, all of which they were able to leverage for the relief efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 1.2. Research process

The purpose with which we had originally started working with both the organisations was on account of an ongoing project, otherwise referred to as the Gender Violence in Public Spaces (GVPS) project. We started this project with both the organisations in October of 2020, just after the first lockdown had been lifted, to analyse the efforts made by organisations to combat public violence against women in different and radical ways. Using two embedded research assistants, we hoped to gain an understanding of the social problem within its social context and had started to analyse the individual organisations in order to build a conceptual framework when the second wave of Covid-19 hit.

The idea for this collaborative report came during the lockdown for the second wave, when we realised that we could be of help in documenting the work that the organisations were doing. After mutual discussions with both the organisations, we felt it would be useful to document (1) all of the relief measures undertaken by BWC and DD, to understand the challenges of the field in delivering the relief measures, (2) the strategies employed by BWC and DD and attempt to understand the operational processes that were necessary to deliver these measures, and (3) the learnings from the field during this process.

The first step towards this process was to review all of the available material that was documented. The organisations gave us access to all records pertaining to their relief measures, and based on the analysis of this documentation, we identified certain themes that we could concentrate on. We then collaboratively identified key informants, and interviewed a range of actors, including BWC and DD employees, beneficiaries, partner organisations and other stakeholders. Interview schedules were prepared for each of these actors, based on the gaps identified from the literature review. Because we conducted this study during the lockdown during the second wave, we primarily conducted telephonic surveys in June and July, although some in-person interviews were also conducted when individuals were available. Each of the interviews were then descriptively analysed based on emergent themes. Based on the analysis of the interview notes, we wrote the individual reports, a summary of which is presented in this paper.

## 2. Relief efforts by the organisations

### 2.1. Relief efforts of BWC

The major ways in which BWC were able to help out with the community is through the following: the setting up of relief camps in Medchal and Secunderabad Railway Station, organizing for safe travel for migrants, responding to urgent needs from the helpline (regarding violence, hunger, and livelihood issues), continuing counseling services for women in distress, provision of ration and cooked food, distribution of masks and other safety equipment, instituting collective farming measures, distribution of sewing machines, and vegetable carts, hosting awareness campaigns, and engaging with state for supply of ration, relief camp etc. interaction with ANMs, ASHA workers etc.

BWC started its response mechanisms by first running a camp at Medchal to provide shelter and food to the migrant workers who were travelling across the Hyderabad-Nagpur highway on foot. During the time that it ran, the camp served more than 2 lakh migrant workers and tried to provide food, shelter, and a safe mode of transportation. Similar help was also provided to the workers identified at Secunderabad railway station. To carry out these tasks, BWC coordinated with government offices like the Collectorate and police departments as well as individual funders and volunteers to manage the camps and to ensure safe departure of the workers to their homes.

In addition to these camps, BWC continually responded to calls received through its helpline. Through these calls, BWC was able to identify the issues of hunger, unemployment and violence in the communities that they were working with. To respond to these urgent needs, BWC decided to provide dry ration to those beneficiaries who were in need. Simultaneously, information about the disease and its prevention strategies was disseminated to all of the communities with the help of various devices such as posters and handbooks. Along with this, masks and sanitizers were also distributed to all of the households in the urban communities.

In order to boost the efforts of health committees formed by collectives in the communities that BWC was working in, training sessions were organised for them with the doctors on the topics of Covid prevention, medication, and vaccination. Identifying the severe emotional distress faced by women and the increased risk (or experienced) of violence within the households, BWC also organized group calls among the survivors of gender violence so that they can find validation and support



from other women. Similar calls with the adolescents were organized by peer educators to discuss the issues arising out of lockdown and the pandemic.

Because of the financial hardship faced by women during this time, BWC also started focusing on providing alternate livelihoods to reduce the financial burden for the women. At Karimnagar and Siddipet districts, the women collectives were encouraged to take up collective farming. In *bastis* in Hyderabad, single women were provided with sewing machines or other means of employment to earn a livelihood, and unemployed youth were provided with technical education so as to enable employment opportunities.

As can be imagined, all of these activities undertaken couldn't be done without active cooperation with government offices. So, one of the most important tasks for BWC was to mobilise the officials. BWC was able to get positive responses from the officials by actively advocating the needs of the communities and pushing them to resolve these difficulties. BWC was also able to identify Covid positive cases, and provide the families suitable assistance such as special nutritious meals or any other amenities by actively collaborating with the frontline workers like ASHA and ANM. Some of these activities are still ongoing, given that the specter of the pandemic is still present.

## **2.2. Relief efforts of DD**

The major relief measures of DD were: the survival and wellbeing relief kits provided to migrants and communities, the latter of which were based on a detailed survey undertaken by youth and women's groups, monitoring of quarantine facilities and providing help, preparing multiple stages of relief packages, medical assistance to those in need, distribution of soaps, sanitizers, sanitary pads, and face masks, negotiating with xenophobia, online education through blended learning methods, designing awareness campaigns, engagement with community through door-to-door interactions, panchayat-level meetings and small groups of community members, engagement with local government functionaries such as ANM and ASHA, and facilitating governance processes etc.

The primary work that DD undertook was related to providing the survival and well-being relief kits to migrants and the communities that they work in. When the first lockdown took place in March 2020, DD went to the interim camps organised by government and found that the camps required basic necessities such as food, sanitation facilities, and other amenities. So, by organizing the women's and youth groups in the villages that they worked with, they provided food, water, and other

amenities (such as masks, soaps, sanitary pads etc.) for not only migrants within these centers, but also for those traveling through these villages.

Additionally, they realised that even families within the villages were in distress. In response, they conducted a detailed household door-to-door survey with the help of the youth and women's groups to identify families who had no earning members, were financially weak, single women, widows, the elderly, people with disabilities, or anyone whom they felt that the government was unable to reach. They were also able to identify a new category of people who required their help – Covid widows – who were left destitute because their husbands had died of Covid. Based on this detailed survey, DD was able to provide a month's ration at a time to these families during the lockdown period.

Apart from providing these ration supplies to distressed and stranded families, DD also adopted a 'blended-learning' approach which integrated digital and traditional methods to teach students. For those who had access to smartphones and internet connection, they formed WhatsApp groups and provided study material through the platform such as lesson pictures, notes, learning material, question papers, etc. For those who did not have access to smartphones but had keypad phones, they were taught over phone calls and text messages. For those who didn't have access to mobile phones or had network issues, teachers would make notes and deliver it to their homes. DD was also actively involved in spreading awareness about COVID-19 especially to those residing in remote hilly areas with poor connectivity. They printed advertisements in newspapers, made loudspeaker announcements in local language, put up posters in public spaces, wrote slogans on walls, etc., to ensure that the communities were aware of the latest information related to the pandemic.

Additionally, DD also worked with close proximity with the local government functionaries such as the police and Anganwadi workers to cater to the needs of the communities. For example, to ensure that pregnant women were getting enough nutrition, they coordinated with the Anganwadi workers to provide women with special food like laddoos and halwa made with ghee, jaggery, coconut and dry fruits and milk and biscuits for children. They also used this opportunity to build capacities in information technologies, and created a common 'Digital Learning Group' so that people from all the blocks could share several digital material and discuss it for better understanding. These became learning-teaching platforms where workers, field staff and volunteers actively participated to build their skills on using technology.

### 3. Organisational learnings

Based on our interviews with the DD and BWC functionalities, we also documented the things that they had learnt during this harrowing time, and there were several overlapping themes, some of which are detailed below:

**Revival and confidence in collectives:** Because both the organisations worked with collectives, they were able to leverage this substantially during the Covid relief efforts. In the case of BWC, they felt that the women's groups were much more active and vocal post their engagement in the Covid-19 relief efforts. This was also true for the youth and women's groups in DD who felt that they were more connected to their community's needs because of the work that they had done during the pandemic.

**Expansion of interest areas and new modes of operations:** They also discovered that they had to work with different arenas to really understand the populations that they were working in. For example, DD felt that they had to learn more about the domain of health and the kind of knowledge that communities themselves had in relation to health. They also felt that they needed to pay attention to livelihoods if they need to engage more closely with the communities. BWC also felt that livelihood was an area that they needed to work on more closely, and started the process of working on collective farming as a result. Additionally, the organisations also felt they needed to adopt to new and different modes of operations such as blended education models.

**Use of technology and social media:** Part of this new learning and new modes of operation had to do with the way in which organisations were able to navigate distances and coordination through the use of technology and social media. In the case of DD, they were able to adapt to a more decentralized decision-making mechanism through the use of technology, and BWC discovered that social media was a great way of engaging volunteers and mobilizing funds for specific projects.

**Confidence in methodology and themselves:** One of the more significant things that both organisations felt was that the years of capacity building and the framework in which they were able to work, finally paid off, and people were able to come together to really engage with the crisis, especially in the case of the community volunteers of BWC and the youth and women group members in the case of DD.

**Renewed sense of purpose:** One of the beneficial effects of the relief efforts that both the organisations articulated was a renewed sense of purpose in relation to their

work. Although it was in parts traumatic and no doubt tiring, there was a sense of satisfaction in having done the work. Moreover, because the organisations have had a greater understanding of their own communities, and have forged new relationships with their communities, they have had some renewed energies for their work.

## 4. Drivers of social change

Apart from this, we also learnt a few things about the process of relief work that has raised a few questions with regards to our understanding of the mechanisms that drive social change. If we use the Covid-19 pandemic as an extraordinary event that provides a unique lens to understand the patterns, the drivers, and the mechanisms of social change, what might this study of Covid provide us? While we are not going to identify the exact drivers of social change within this conference paper, we do want to identify a few patterns or drives such as the institutional framework of civil society, the role of civil society, the nature of collectives, which might help us find the answers.

### 4.1. Structures of discrimination and oppression

One of the major patterns that we noted for both the organisations was that during the relief work, they encountered very familiar structures of discrimination and oppression. When we examined the challenges that organisations faced, it was primarily related to the ways in which traditional structures of casteism, regionalism, and sexism operated throughout the pandemic. For example, both the organisations found that there was rampant discrimination against migrants in the cities and in the villages. They also found that there was an increase in the restrictions of movement for women, an increased degree of casteism in the village, and increased reporting of sexual and physical violence in the communities that both organisations worked in. In fact, both the organisations felt that the Covid-19 pandemic taught them the stability and fluidity of these forms of discrimination. For example, while the physical restrictions on movement were the same, the narratives that these physical restrictions were able to take on – for example, using health to prevent mobility of girls, or using safety as a way to practice casteist norms – are still very agile. These age-old practices, therefore, were able to transform narratives of safety and caution to practices of untouchability and discrimination, providing us a unique insight into the way that these practices are both nebulous and sturdy at the same time. These changes in narratives is, therefore, a critical factor that we will be paying attention to in our field work.

### 4.2. Invisibility of marginalisation

Another theme that we encountered during this field work was related to the way in which certain forms of marginalisation was made invisible. One of the most surprising things that both BWC and DD noted was that while they were very close to their communities and had a good understanding of the issues that the

communities faced, the pandemic surprised them as to the pockets of marginalisation that continued to exist within the communities that they worked extensively with. The layers of invisibility even among those marginalised came as a revelation to the organisations. The fact that these populations are all but invisible to the State was also a challenge for the organisations, as they struggled to find policy spaces for these historically neglected communities. So, the question of how to engage with invisible actors while working to engage with the State and the community is a question that we have to think about.

### 4.3. The role of collectivisation

What was clear from examining the data from both the organisations was that collectivisation as a methodology works. We encountered many different ways in which the collectives within each of the organisations were able to do the work, and in fact, strengthened during the pandemic. For both organisations, the relationships that might have gotten weaker over a period of time transformed into a well-oiled machine in certain spaces, reviving not just the collectives, but the enthusiasm to create positive outcomes for the village. The role of the collectives, therefore, were central to the work that the organisations were doing. At the same time, we could also see the various pitfalls that *relying* solely on collectives to understand the fulcrum of social change can start to pose problems for us, for two specific reasons, detailed below.

When we herald that the collectives were able to provide services and facilities that the state was simply unable to reach, it also begs the question – what is its relationship to the State? While both the organisations struggle hard to ensure that the collectives ensure that the State becomes responsive and accountable, at least, in the Covid scenario, they will be ready to admit that the State, while supportive, was largely absent, and in some cases, very hostile to the collectives' efforts. So, the question that it raises for us is – what, then, is the nature of this changing ambiguous relationship between the state and the citizen and how is this mediated through the means / methodology of the collective?

Another interesting dimension is to really pose the question of whether the collective acts in the interest of the individual. We know, in general, that the community doesn't always act in the favour of its least empowered. If we engage with community interests, we know that these come at the cost of those who are at the periphery of power within the community. We started to think about this, when we examined stories of financial distress of volunteers, the high care work done by families of volunteers (primarily borne by women), and the high time costs of

volunteerism – none of which are in the interests of the individuals. The questions for us to explore for the future is to move beyond whether collectives work or not (we are generally agreed that by and large, they do), but how are they able to tackle the feminist problem of difference, what is the relationship between collective and individual interest, and what is the nature of negotiation when they do not align? Exploring this will provide us ideas about the mechanisms of social change that the collectives are able to influence.

#### **4.4. Networks matter**

Another pattern that was very clear was that the networks of DD and BWC were the engine of the relief efforts. If we harken back to the original ideas of Mark Granovetter in his seminar paper, *The Strength of Weak Ties*, we know that the networks provide the foundation for social phenomena of social mobility, political organisation and social cohesion. In fact, when we talk about the strength of collectives, we often think of the ties that support these collectives as arising from a combination of time, emotional intensity, and purposiveness of these ties, and the reciprocal services that these ties provide. What we have also understood from both the organisations and the way in which they were able to leverage their social networks (and as postulated by Granovetter) is that this is not the only way that we can think of these ties.

Instead, we can also examine weak ties – ties that loosely bind individuals without any purpose or relationships – as essential to providing a means of social cohesion. Weak ties are not just important to move information and ideas, but to generate a sense of common community across differences. The inadvertent maintenance of weak ties, therefore, appeared to us as one of the most significant factors in influence social outcomes – one of the essential ways in which communities were able to organize for common goals and mobilise resources against social threats. In fact, it is just as possible that stronger ties provide the foundation for fragmentation and regression. One of the lessons, therefore, for us from the study is to really examine the minutiae of network relationships not just to identify the ways in which they bolster the work being done by the organisations, but also to examine the processes by which social structures (through social networks / weak ties) influences individual behaviour.

#### **4.5. Role of civil society**

During this entire endeavour, we have been pondering about the role of civil society in influencing social change, and its engagement with the State in doing so. Both the

organisations have had a long history of engaging with the State, in that they are actively trying to bridge the gap through direct and indirect means between the state and the citizen. During the pandemic, the delicacy of navigating this relationship was highlighted. Both organisations had to walk the fine line between involving the State in all of its work, but also pushing the State to do more. Using the networks that they had with the State (built over a long period of time) and through mobilizing local or individual actors of the State (the local policemen, the local ANMs, ASHA workers etc.), they were able to push the State to localised temporary solutions during the pandemic. For example, both the organisations were able to highlight the specific vulnerabilities of lactating mothers, the migrants in the city, the tribals located in remote areas, 'Covid' widows, or the abandoned elderly to their local governments, and were successfully able to provide specific relief packages that could aid their survival.

By identifying these pockets of marginalisation that the State was not able to address through its traditional relief measures, the organisations invariably acted as a bridge and channel of communication and (often times) distribution between the State and the communities. In fact, both the organisations told us that their relationships to the ground were highly valued by local state authorities and that in any of the work done in their communities by the State, the last mile connectivity was mapped not through the functionaries of the State, but through their own voluntary work in difficult contexts and circumstances. These connections and the importance of these relationships with the most vulnerable in the communities were often acknowledged at the local level, but were not always recognised at the upper echelons of the State. Given that large-scale bureaucracies depend on the efforts of civil society as a *necessary* means for last mile delivery, it is curious that the national development discourse by the State often negates or derides their role. The nature of this evolving and contrarian relationship between the State and civil society, especially in this turbulent environment, therefore, is a question that has to be explored in much greater detail.



## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we want to state that the study of the relief efforts has provided a lot of material insight into the systems and mechanisms of relief work and the role that methodologies (such as collectivisation) played in creating positive social outcomes to many people in distress. We also have many ongoing questions that we want to explore based on this knowledge, including the nature and changing relationships between individual and state, individual and collective, civil society and state, and so on.

While we are asking all of these questions, we also want to acknowledge that while we were documenting these relief efforts, we couldn't help be touched and often, overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the work that these organisations did during a very perilous time. Regardless of the critical lens that we took to these data and the literature, we found ourselves being moved by people we had never met, and by stories of people who we know who will continue to face peril. We know that these are difficult times, but as our analyses of networks indicates, the smallest of linkages can have the greatest of influence.

So, it is important to acknowledge the work of the many who contributed to the relief efforts – the ones who went back to work as soon as they recovered from Covid, who left their ailing daughters and sons to take care of others, the ones who worried, the ones who sang songs of defiance in the hardest of times. It is important that we acknowledge that debt that we owe them for letting us get a glimpse of what they did, and we thank them for the hope that they carry in everything that they do.



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