

What Frontline Social Workers Want Funders to Know

By Aishwarya Bhuta

This article draws on research conducted by The Solidarity Network in India, exploring the safety, security, and wellbeing of frontline social workers. While the findings are grounded in one context, they raise important questions for funders everywhere about whose voices shape funding practices.

This article, and the research study it draws from, is a small window through which funders directly hear from frontline social workers, a group otherwise one step removed from funders. This is very valuable since it is these frontline social workers that form the heart of the movements that funders aim to support:

About The Solidarity Network:

The Solidarity Network was launched by [Shakti Shalini](#) (an organisation based in India and working for gender equality since 1987) in August 2019 after one of its counsellors, Kritika (name changed), was attacked by a gang of eight people because she was protecting the identity, security, confidentiality, and choices of a woman survivor of sexual and gender-based violence residing at Shakti Shalini's shelter home. With sheer force and will power, Kritika escaped with her life. About 100 people who gathered on the street chose to remain bystanders instead of intervening or offering her any support. This incident galvanised the Shakti Shalini team to launch The Solidarity Network. This is a pan-India network of frontline social workers and human rights defenders affiliated with organisations or working independently across India. As of June 2026, the Network has 135 members and offers a safe space for them to engage, debate, discuss, generate knowledge, and find solutions to enhance the rights, security, and wellbeing of frontline social workers.

About the Research Study 'Most Burdened, Least Supported: Towards Security and Wellness of Frontline Social Workers':

In 2026, The Solidarity Network conducted a research study on the securities and wellness of frontline social workers in India in two phases. A virtual key stakeholder consultation with 32 members of The Solidarity Network was followed by an anonymous online survey with 63 frontline social workers affiliated with an NGO/ CSO/ collective, or working independently.

This study was the first-of-its-kind attempt to assess the current status of the physical, psycho-emotional, and financial securities and wellness of frontline social workers. It also aimed to create a primary blueprint for future hope, possibility, and action for improving the present situation. In essence, this initiative was an attempt to spark discussions and enable concerted action by multiple stakeholders including funders for ensuring that securities and wellness of frontline social workers becomes a priority rather than an afterthought.

A Brief Summary of the Findings:

“I work in rural areas. In cases involving rape, and Panchayats, we face significant pressure and threats. I supported a family struggling with a gang rape case, and I was under intense pressure to ‘settle’ the matter. I received many threatening calls asking for my address. Sometimes, when we support those who are vulnerable, members of the community surround us and attempt to loot or kill us. At such times, our morale is broken.”

- A Woman Frontline Social Worker

The study found that the experience of physical security is highly gendered. Nearly 95% of the male frontline social workers stated that they felt physically safe in their work, compared to only 61.9% of the women frontline social workers who participated in the study.

Frontline social workers are highly insecure on the financial front as well. Salaries are tied to projects which in turn are tied to funding which can be discontinued suddenly or be available only for a short period; thus, financial precarity is a reality many frontline social workers are navigating. In addition, the respondents shared that there are pay gaps, salaries are often not paid timely and are not in alignment with the workload, and extra hours of work are not compensated. Thus, there exists a triple burden of precarious employment, lack of social protection and benefits, and no savings for the future. Barely 36.5% of the respondents were receiving employee benefits, and only one in four had formal working arrangements or job security.

“I attend distress calls over a helpline number. Due to the nature of our frontline work, mental health challenges are quite common. Constantly listening to stories of violence and abuse is triggering and emotionally exhausting. There is also a need to be calm and patient on every call, which is difficult as we handle a high volume of calls with little rest in between.”

- A Helpline Social Worker

The majority of respondents indicated experiencing severe secondary trauma and burnout, with very little support spaces to cope. Less than half the respondents had access to confidential, non-judgmental mental health support through the employer and even fewer had provisions for well-being check-ins at the workplace.

The detailed findings from the study, experiential narrations of the frontline social workers, and their recommendations for funders, leadership of organisations, law-enforcing agencies and state actors for improving their securities can be read in the report [here](#).

Recommendations for funders:

Specifically for funding institutions, this study offers a unique perspective as it centres the voices of frontline social workers (and not the management of the organisations), and brings to the fore their experiential insights on improving their securities across the physical, the psycho-emotional, and the financial dimensions. The recommendations for funders are summarised in the following three broad categories:

1. Earmark dedicated funds within every project or grant to support the physical safety and mental health needs of frontline social workers

Physical security of frontline social workers entails safeguarding them from physical harm including violence. It also includes ensuring that basic infrastructure and amenities are in place to enable them to execute their everyday tasks effectively. For this, dedicated funds can be earmarked within every project or grant to support the physical safety and mental health needs of frontline social workers staffed on it. Further, explicit measures for the safety and security of frontline social workers can be incorporated into the reporting and compliance requirements of grantee organisations. This can help to strengthen downward accountability by encouraging organisational leadership to provide verifiable evidence of ethical employment practices in relation to frontline staff.

2. Invest in self-care and collective care models for frontline social workers

Psycho-emotional security of frontline social workers encompasses ensuring that they feel emotionally and psychologically safe and supported. This involves adequate resource provision for promoting and institutionalising self-care and collective care practices for frontline social workers at the organisational level. Funders can incentivise organisational leaders to organise regular training sessions on stress management, boundary-setting, emotional regulation, self-care, collective care, and grounding techniques for frontline teams. Moreover, funders can support collective care models which can be implemented at the organisational level, and worker-led initiatives designed and implemented by frontline social workers themselves which can go a long way in improving their psycho-emotional securities. Funders can invest in initiatives aimed at sustaining collective care and solidarity, including peer networks that facilitate emergency support, information-sharing, and legal aid referrals. Cross-organisational peer networks can help to exchange practices on self-care, collective care, and risk mitigation.

3. Flexible funding to support organisational leaders in prioritising securities of frontline staff

Financial security involves having opportunities for decent work and adequate remuneration to be able to afford a basic standard of living in the present, in addition to having similar protections for the future. For this, funders can, to the extent possible, provide flexible, multi-year funding to organisations instead of short-term, output-driven grants that exacerbate employment precarity. Moreover, if a grant is to be terminated, a minimum notice period of three months can be provided to the organisation.

Conclusion:

There is no doubt that there is much that the leadership and management of grassroots organisations need to do for safeguarding their frontline staff. However, this is scarcely possible without the support of funders. Unless the securities of frontline social workers finds a place on the agenda of funders, it is unlikely to do so on that of organisational leaders at a large scale, or within the sector more broadly. If funders begin to prioritise the securities and

wellness of frontline social workers as a part of their selection, compliance, reporting, and grant-making practices, the conversation on this subject is likely to trickle down, spread, and eventually, become the norm.

This essay is part of Better Funding's *Insight* series, which shares practitioner perspectives on how funding can better support grassroots work and movement building.

It sits within a broader collection of content—including case studies, insights, and practices—exploring feminist funding and what the movement is asking of funders today.



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