

Calls mount to protect gig workers

Casual staff 'among worst-hit' by Covid

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Academics are urging the government to provide better welfare protection for informal workers whose livelihoods have been adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The call was made at a recent online seminar on the plight of urban communities during the virus outbreak. It was organised by the Public Sociology Association (PSA).

Sayamol Charoenratana, the PSA's chairwoman, said the pandemic has shed light on social and economic challenges, while its impact on workers in the informal economy in urban communities would be long term.

Citing a study, she said workers in the informal sector, especially those known as "food workers", were among the hardest hit.

According to Ms Sayamol, "food workers" covers everyone in the food industry, ranging from farmworkers and food-processing labourers to

food delivery people and waste treatment staff.

She said most were low-income earners who work long hours and have no time to acquire new skills, giving them scant job opportunities.

They don't benefit from any form of social protection and due to the nature of their work are unable to work from home, she said, adding this group has not pushed for any protection.

She said when the pandemic hit, they did not have access to proper health or state agencies.

"The pandemic has revealed vulnerabilities in our public health care and other safety net systems that we think are strong. Agencies concerned will have to address these weaknesses and problems. We don't know how long the crisis will last or if there will be a bigger one," she said.

Inthira Witthayasomboon, a volunteer health worker, said the pandemic exposed weaknesses in public service systems in urban communities including Bangkok.

She said that when the city was hit by severe bed shortages, some Covid-19 patients had to wait for help for days before they received treatment. In some cases, their conditions worsened,

she said.

Economic hardship from the outbreak has taken a heavy toll on the mental health of families, she said.

Suebsakul Kijjukorn, a researcher of Mae Fah Luang University from Chiang Rai, said many migrant workers have been left to face hardship alone during the pandemic despite them being part of the country's economic growth.

He also called on local administrative organisations to change their attitude toward this group of workers.

"They are part of the economy but local bodies don't tend to their needs because they can't vote," he said.