Media
Under the Lens

Representation of *migrant workers*
in regional media during the COVID crisis

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Table of Contents

Background

COVID, migrants and media

We live in complex mass societies where it is impossible to get a real sense of the scale and complexity of issues that affect us directly through personal interactions. The onset of COVID-19 has further weakened possibilities of direct interaction during extended periods of lockdown. As a result, our complex societies have come to depend on media and communication systems to enable meaning making. Media representations of the complex reality have become a crucial way for millions of citizens to make sense of the world. For various reasons, public trust in the media has declined globally, but India remains one of the countries with the highest amount of public trust in the media, a little below 80%. Trust in the media also means that large sections of the public rely on it to make sense of various phenomena that they may have no personal experience with. Migration and labour is one such category that can be termed as a highly 'mediated' issue for much of the middle and upper classes.

Migration in India has been an issue that has never got the media attention it deserves despite the scale at which it occurs. There has been plenty of literature on various long-term issues such as the decline of agriculture, growing economic inequality as well as rapid urbanisation that requires underpaid labour for large infrastructure projects and construction. Apart from the general lack of attention to the complexities of migration in media reportage, there was an unusually high amount of media coverage provided to migrant workers in 2020. Due to the onset of COVID-19 in early 2020, the Government of India announced a national lockdown with very little notice. As a result of this sudden lockdown, workers in cities across the country faced a double problem - freeze in wages and mobility. Stuck without work, money, and often without any kind of material or other kinds of support, thousands of workers started preparing to go back to their home states. While the middle and upper classes began to grapple with being indoors, the media was full of reports about workers crowding public transport stations/terminals. State governments could not make up their minds about resuming transport for workers. Eventually, workers started walking back home without any other option.

The impossibility of such a harsh and long journey provided for powerful media reports that thrived on the emotional poignancy of the situation. To a lesser extent, workers also received some media attention since their living and working conditions suddenly came into the spotlight with respect to the risk of COVID-19. Living conditions were revealed to be totally unsuitable for social distancing with as many as 5-6 workers forced to live in a tiny room. Most of the workers were living in makeshift settlements where water was not easily accessible. Some of the media reports focused on these appalling conditions not as a violation of labour laws or as mistreatment or exploitation of workers, but as health risks for the urban population.

It is important to get a sense of media coverage on migration and labour since the mediation of it makes a difference to how issues of migration and labour are governed by officials, what kinds of relief measures are announced, and to shaping a small but influential part of public opinion. While there is a fair amount of global literature on the subject in general, using diverse theoretical and methodological approaches, we found that there is a dearth of research to investigate the role of regional media in India in terms of representation of migrant workers and labourers.

Regional media publications and television channels are widely read and watched and often become crucial sources of local (state and district level) information. Crucially, they also reach out to their audiences through regional languages that are often much more accessible than Hindi or English.

In order to address this gap, this research study explores the representation of migration and labour related issues by mainstream newspapers and television news channels in Kerala and Karnataka. It is our hope that this report leads to further research on the role of regional media in shaping various aspects of modern life.

Research Methods

Content analysis and discourse analysis

Studying media and communications can be a tricky and complex affair since the enterprise of mediation itself has undergone transformative changes over the last few decades. Until the 1980s, the central government had a monopoly on broadcasting while print has enjoyed a healthy and to some extent, independent career since the early 1900s. From the mid-1980s to early 1990s, the Indian media and communications industry has undergone a series of changes that have been driven by liberalisation and globalisation. The digitalisation of communication networks has made it difficult to separate the global from the local. Various technological developments in media affordances (whether it is proliferation of like, share, react buttons, or the constantly changing tickers and use of graphics or the increasing use of big data in media content in general) provide ever increasing ways of analysing media and communications.

In terms of research approaches too, there are diverse techniques to studying the role of media. There are scholars who study the political economy of the media. They study ways in which the media and communication industries are interlinked to wider economic relations and networks, how they become conduits for value generation and circulation of capital, the tendencies of monopolisation and concentration in media and communication markets and so on. There are also studies that explore the various material and symbolic strata that comprise the complex contemporary digital networks ranging from fiber optic cables and satellite infrastructure

to the supposedly decentralised protocols that govern the internet as we use it today. Then there are other studies that explore the ways in which audiences make meaning of media content, circulation etc.

This study is strictly an analysis of the content of mainstream television news and newspapers. It does not explore other interrelated aspects such as media ownership, study of audiences, the materiality of media, social media usage etc. It uses a mixed methods approach, dominated by a quantitative content analysis combined with a smaller qualitative element - namely a discourse analysis. The strength of the quantitative content analysis is that the methodology is replicable and scalable. The weakness of the method is that it is restricted to interpreting significance in the frequency of occurrence (of a phenomenon - a word, an image and so on).

To get a sense of the mainstream coverage of migrant workers in Kerala and Karnataka, we selected four popular newspapers and four popular TV news channels for each of these two states. The selected Kannada newspapers were *Vijayvani, Udayvani, Prajavani and Kannada Prabha*; and the Kannada TV news channels were *Digvijaya News, TV9 Kannada, Public TV and Suvarna Kannada*. The Malayalam newspapers were *Mathrubhumi, Deshabhimani, Kerala Koumudi and Madhyamam*; and the Malayalam TV news channels were *Asianet News, Mathrubhumi News, Manorama News and 24 News*. Our coding units were front pages of Kannada

and Malayalam newspapers as well as prime time news shows of Kannada and Malayalam television channels. In total, we analysed, 192 media messages, i.e. 96 front pages from newspapers and 96 prime time television shows between the period of March 2020 to March 2021 covering print and broadcast content across both Kannada and Malayalam[1].

Our sampling was purposive in nature since we were specifically interested in media coverage of migrant workers during two distinct periods – workers trying to get back home in early and mid-2020, and the so-called 'reform' of labour laws in late 2020. The quantitative part of our study focused on a few broad themes related to our research questions mentioned above. We developed a coding sheet and code book based on these themes and piloted the validity of our variables and categories through an inter-coder reliability test for a smaller sample of media coverage.

Subsequently, we reworked the code book and coding sheet getting the actual coding done by two coders each for respective languages. We were aiming to get uniform samples across the duration of the study but that was not possible since there was hardly

any coverage on migrant workers in the media starting September 2020. Hence, the sample size is larger for the months between March and August 2020.

The other method we used is *Discourse Analysis*, a qualitative research tool that seeks to critically interrogate the broader ideological discourses manifested in mainstream media on the issue of migration in general and migrant workers in particular. Contrary to content analysis, which is applied to a relatively larger sample that provides generalisable findings by measuring frequency of occurrence, discourse analysis provides insights on how language shapes meaning within a broader framework of power and ideology. For the latter method, we used a much smaller sample of 16 texts (four print articles from each language and four television segments from each language). The analysis in this part of the research focuses on exposing the underlying relationships in these texts, showing how relations are constructed between different groups and institutions, the emotions and rationalities associated with these groups, the ways in which meanings are constructed in association with specific groups and with what consequences.

Table 1: Distribution of sample for the duration of the study

	TV News	Newspapers
Karnataka Media		
March 2020 - August 2020	47	45
September 2020 - March 2021	1	3
Total	48	48
Kerala Media		
March 2020 - August 2020	40	45
September 2020 - March 2021	8	3
Total	48	48
Total Sample Size	96	96

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[1] Since our sampling was purposive, we aimed at selecting at least 48 unique content pieces from each media outlet, whether newspapers or television, Kannada or Malayalam. We could not find 48 pieces of content only on front pages or prime time shows. In such cases, we looked for reports from inside pages and TV reports apart from prime time shows. Further, looking at archived television shows online revealed that for many shows, it was not clear whether the show was prime time or not, or in cases of a separate clip, what its placement was within a show.

There are several limitations to this study that should be considered in light of the findings and analysis presented below. The sampling for the quantitative research and the selection of texts for the qualitative research was from a total of four television news channels and four newspapers each for Kannada and Malayalam. Since the number of viewers and readers of television channels and newspapers are directly tied to revenue generation (through advertisements from private advertisers and government), it is difficult to find reliable and accurate numbers. This is why we spoke to general audiences and journalists to seek recommendations on popular and mainstream television channels and newspapers from Karnataka and Kerala. While these may not necessarily be the most viewed or read, our research incorporated them for their undoubtedly mainstream approach to reportage.

The research team has direct working knowledge of Kannada. For Malayalam media, the research study recruited Malayali speaking and reading coders who were first familiarised with the variables and categories used for the research. They then applied the coding sheet to their respective sample. While a basic inter-coder reliability exercise was carried out with the preliminary coding framework, a more rigorous process of iteratively developing the code book could have resulted in a more refined set of categories and variables for analysis.

In terms of comparing the methods used for this study, the qualitative research which is more interpretivist than the content analysis, was done by translating the coverage into English. This translation always carries with it a process of simplification and loss of meaning, with less scope for analysing nuance, irony, insider references and so on. Finally, in terms of logistical and practical issues, the researchers faced some sampling difficulties in terms of accessing archives of media content. Often, content was not archived systematically, or in several cases, it was not classified accurately. In other cases, the archives were simply unavailable.

Prominence and Priority

How important is the story?

While the lockdown came amidst news of a global health concern, eventually declared a pandemic, much of the media coverage was concerned with uncovering information about COVID-19, the recent history of infectious viruses in other parts of the world, what other countries were doing to address infections, the global economic impact of lockdowns and so on. However, during the initial part of the first lockdown in India, as migrant workers gathered at public transport terminals and subsequently on the roads, it became impossible for the mainstream media to ignore this rather large constituency. The question we try to answer here is whether the media made the coverage of migrant workers a priority. Priority was determined by analysing the prominence given to coverage in terms of visibility and placement. In television, we see whether news segments on migrant workers appear at the start of the prime time show, and how long the coverage lasts within the show. In newspapers, we see where reports on migrant workers are placed in the newspaper and measure priority in terms of the number of columns given to the story (size) as well as whether the story is accompanied by an image.

Figure 1: Duration of stories on TV news (in minutes)

Kannada TV news   Malayalam TV news
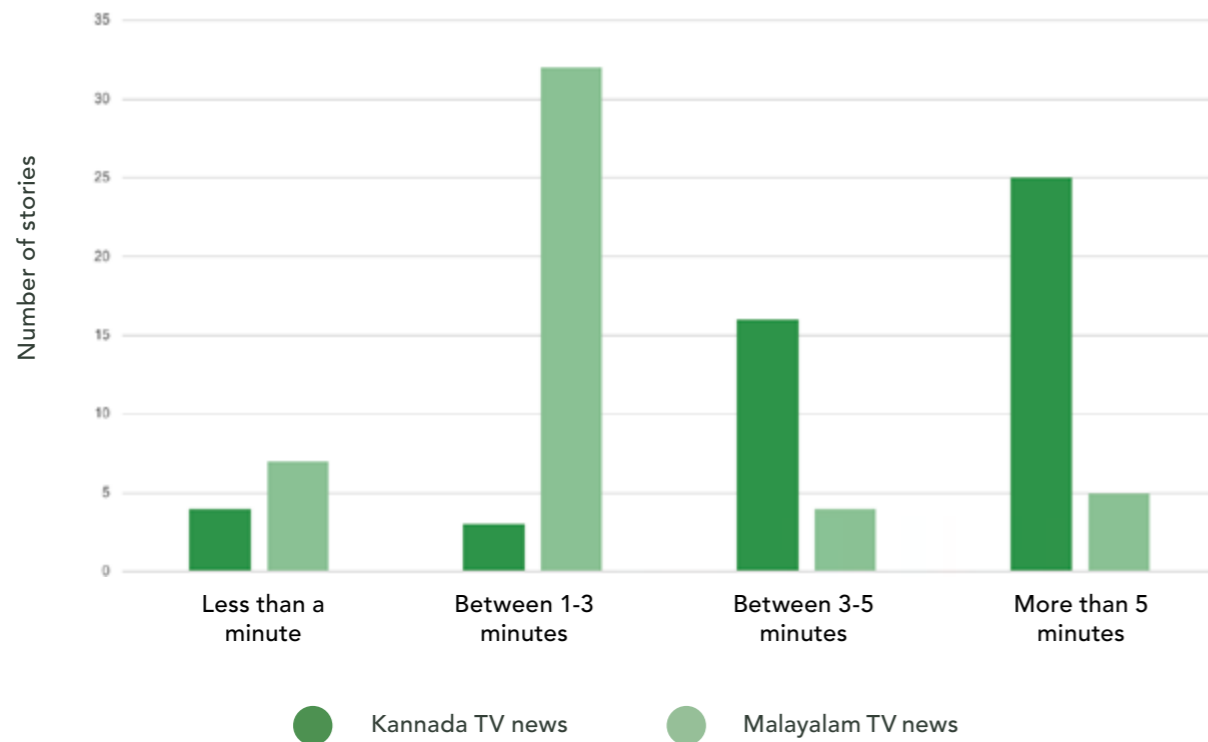
Duration of the story in the news cycle

The duration or length of the story in a news cycle indicates the prominence given to the issue at that point of time. It points to how much time was allocated to the story on TV news or how much was provided to it in newspapers and, how willing they were to delve deeper into the details of the issue. From a sample of 48 news stories each from Kannada and Malayalam TV news, it emerged that in Kannada TV news, most stories were either three to five minutes long or were more than five minutes. In Malayalam TV news, almost all stories were between one to three minutes long (Figures 1 and 2).

Placement of stories in newspapers

It is important to note the placement of the story in newspapers. During the period of this study, more stories about migrant workers made headlines in Kannada newspapers as compared to Malayalam newspapers (Figure 3). It is interesting to note how Kannada and Malayalam newspapers covered the issue compared to their counterparts in TV news. Data reveals that there were not many stories longer than five columns in newspapers while TV news, especially in Kannada, had more stories that were longer than five minutes.

In Kannada newspapers most stories were either four to five columns long or were single column. There was no story that was more than five columns while on Kannada TV news, most stories were more than five minutes long. One possible reason for this could be that the story of workers walking back home during the lockdown lends itself to visual treatment. This could partially explain why TV news channels covered the phenomenon of workers walking more than their counterparts in print. In case of Malayalam newspapers, most stories were single column with handful of them being three to four columns long. There were a few stories that were more than five columns long indicating a deeper engagement with the issue.

Images accompanying newspaper articles

To understand the prominence given to the story, we also analysed if there was a corresponding image with the article. As seen from Figure 4, in Kannada newspapers, more than 30 stories had an image alongside while in Malayalam newspapers, about 25 stories did. Rather than coverage of structural issues around migration and labour, the phenomena of huge numbers of people walking on the streets lends itself to a dramatic storyline. That could be the reason why a relatively large number of stories in our sample had images accompanying the articles.

Figure 2: Length of stories in newspapers

Number of stories

- Kannada newspapers
- Malayalam newspapers

(x-axis: Single column, Between 2-3 columns, Between 4-5 columns, More than 5 columns)

Figure 3: Placement of stories in newspapers

Number of stories

(x-axis: Kannada newspapers, Malayalam newspapers)

- Top story
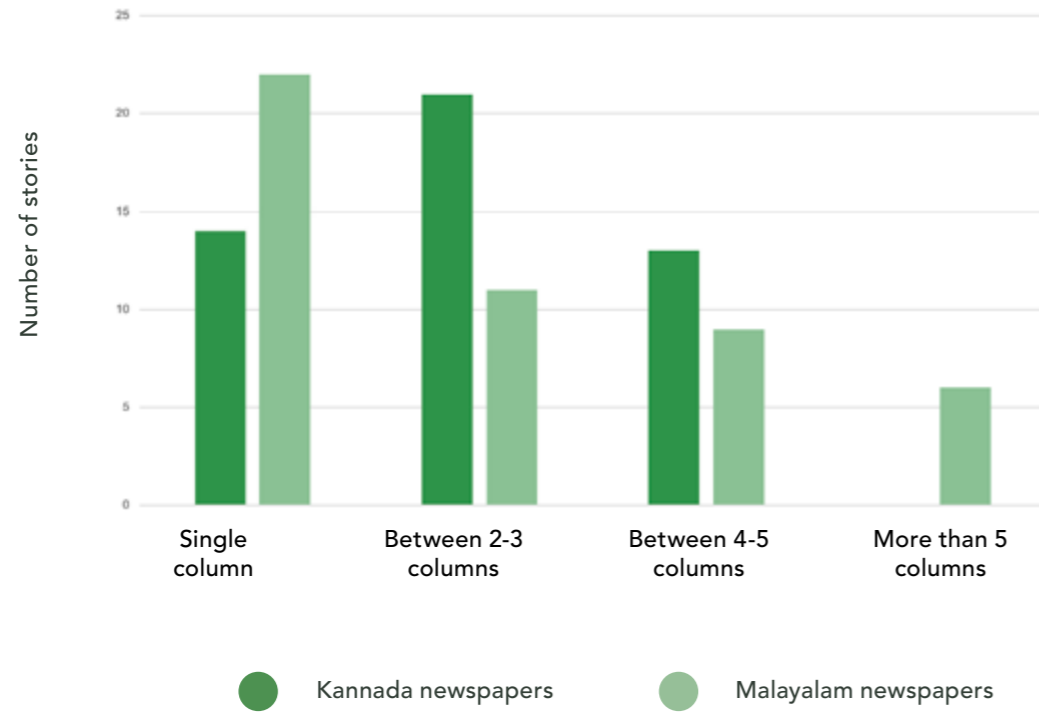- First half of the page
- Second half of the page

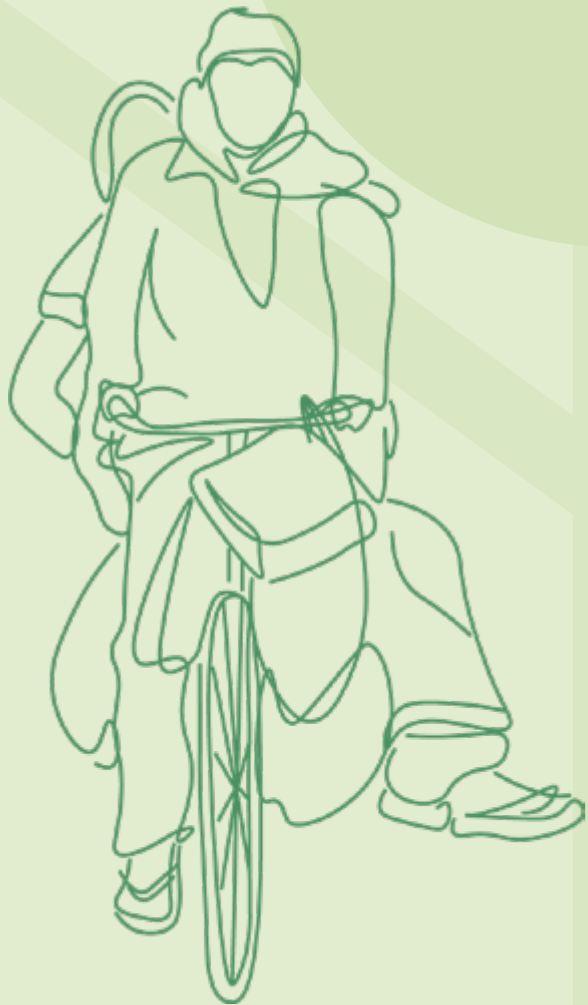## Figure 4: Proportion of newspaper stories with accompanying images

Malayalam newspapers

Kannada newspapers
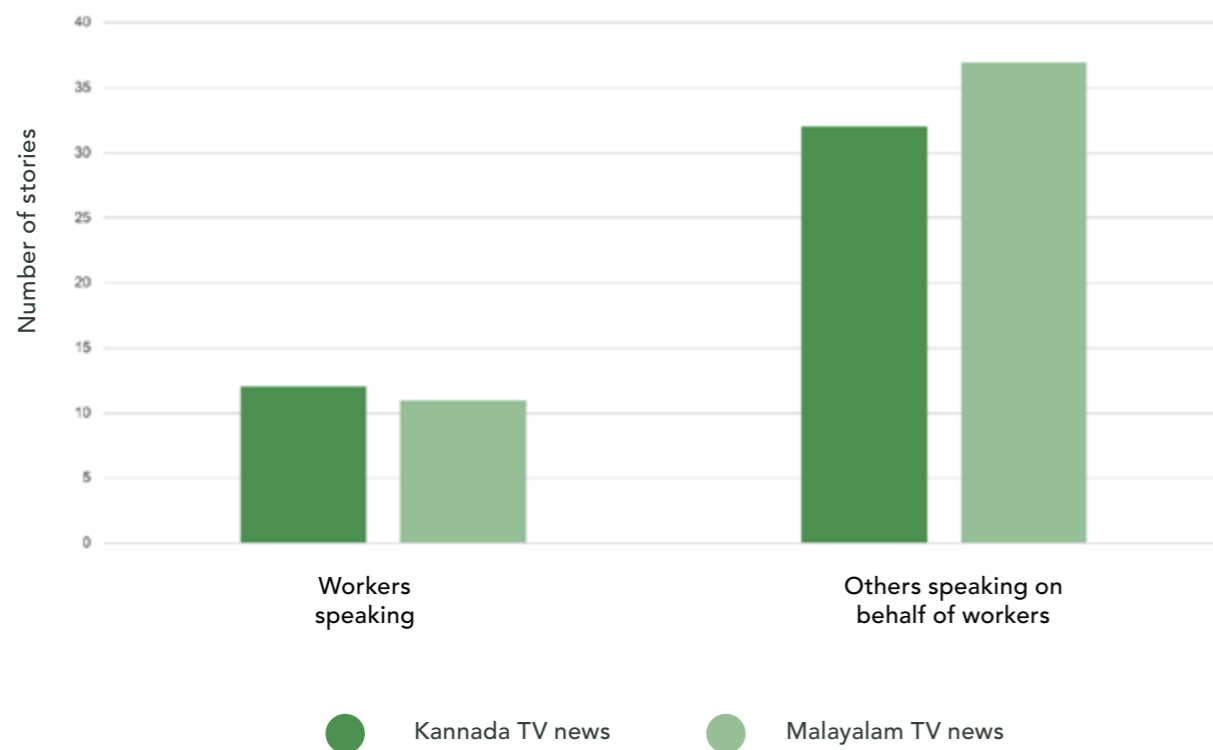
Number of stories

- With image
- Without image
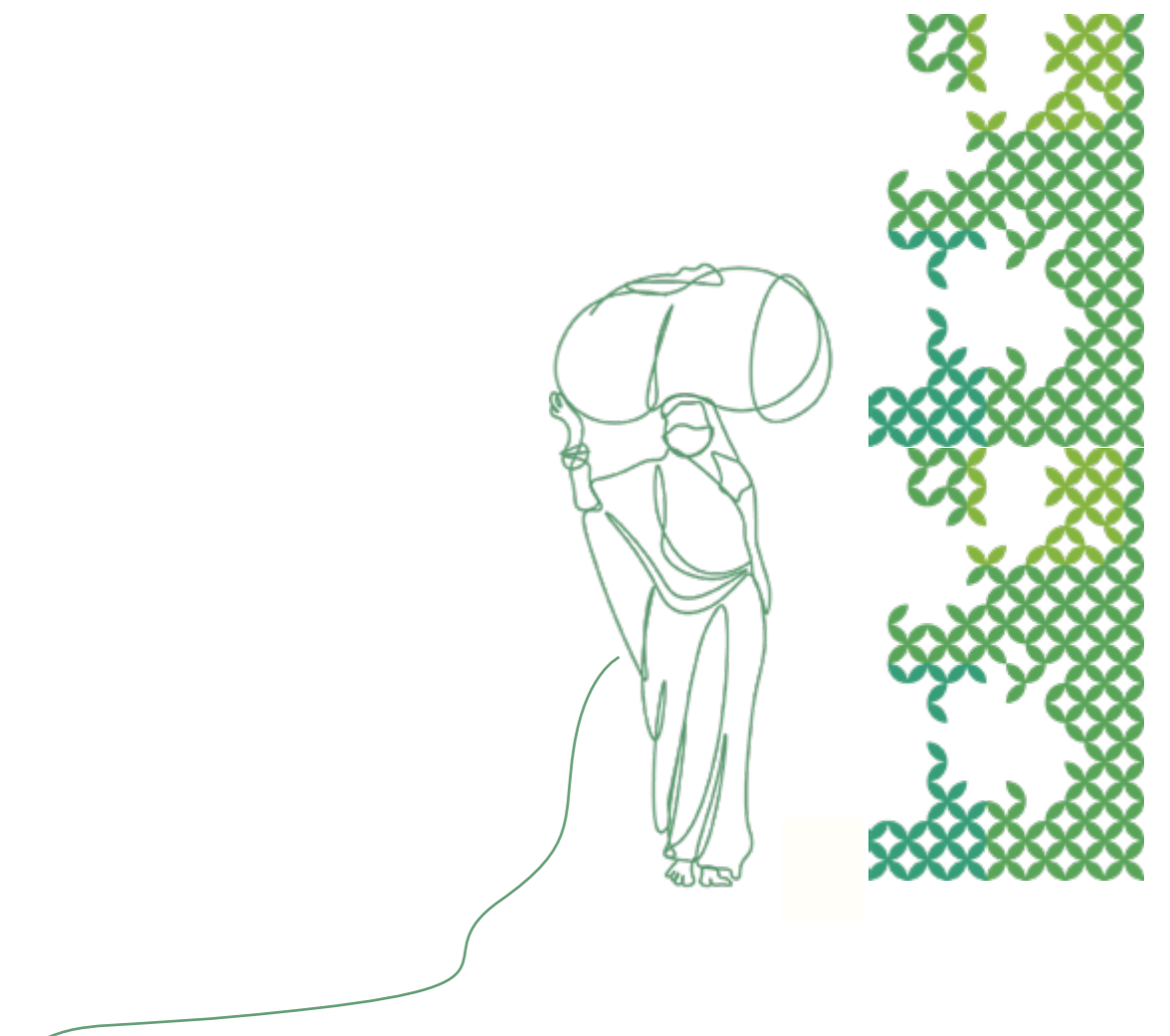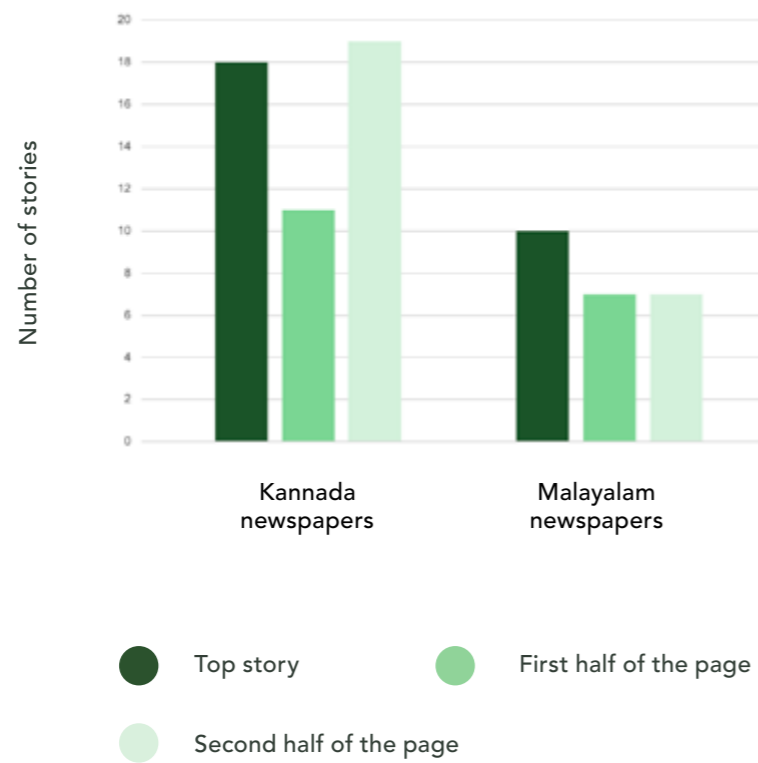
Voice and Representation

Who is speaking?

At the time of representing an issue, typically the media, at least for the sake of form, attempts to get perspectives from actors who are directly affected by the issue being reported. Given that migrant workers are unaware of the local language, belong to the working class and come from Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi backgrounds, they face exclusion from the media in general. With the unprecedented phenomenon of hundreds of workers walking back home or being gathered at public transport stations/terminals, it would be crucial to understand whether the media would, at the very least in this instance, enable migrant workers to finally speak for themselves. In this section, we investigate whether migrant workers were able to speak for themselves in mainstream media as compared to other actors representing them. It should be noted that the findings below concern stories/segments specifically on migrant workers.

Figure 5: Voice represented in stories on TV news

Kannada TV news   Malayalam TV news

Kannada newspapers   Malayalam newspapers
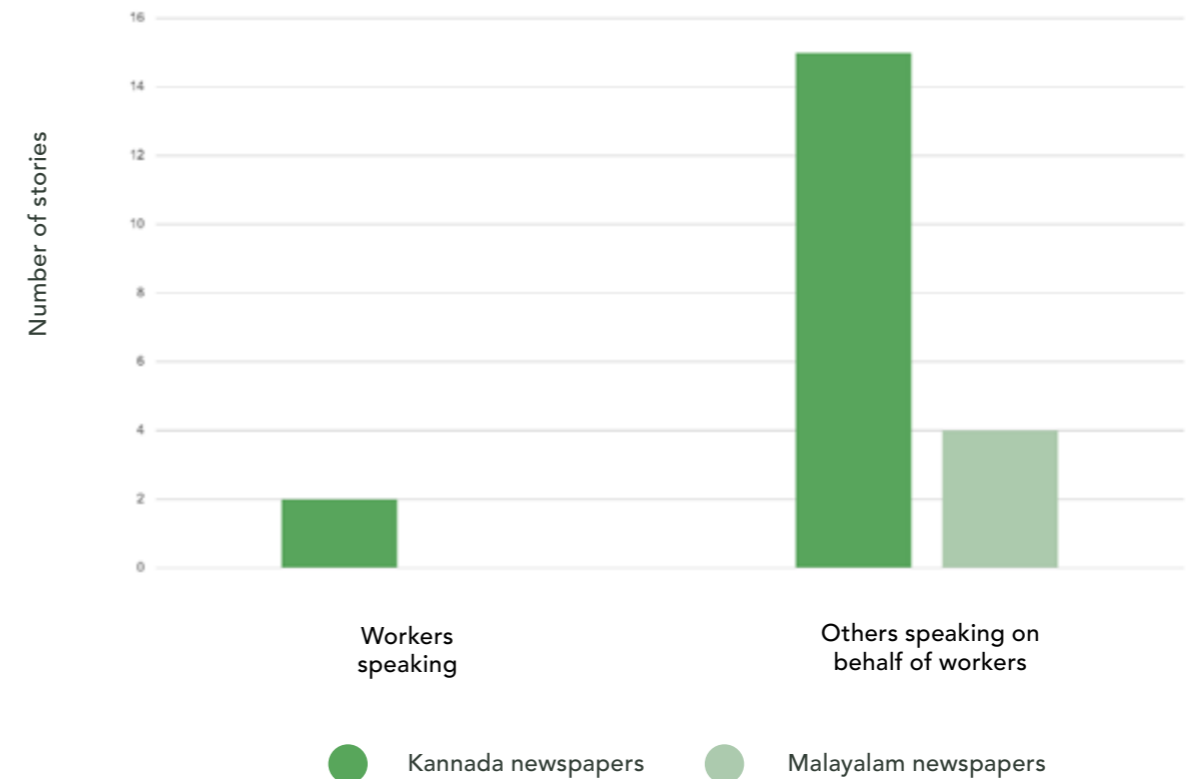
It is evident from the data that there was hardly any space given to the worker's voice in TV news or newspapers even when the story was centered around them. In fact, it was mostly others who were seen speaking on behalf of workers (Figures 5 and 6). From the sample of 48 stories in each language, there were only about 10-12 TV news stories in both Kannada and Malayalam that actually had any direct quotes from workers themselves. Close to 40 stories had quotes from other people speaking on behalf of or about workers. Amongst those speaking on behalf of migrant workers, it was mostly political leaders or cabinet ministers from the ruling party or experts like activists, representatives of civil society organisations, academicians, doctors, union leaders or lawyers.

It was worse in case of newspapers in both languages. There were hardly any quotes in the articles. Most articles consisted of reportage without direct quotes from any stakeholder. In Kannada newspapers, there were only two stories that had a direct quote from a worker. About 15 stories had others speaking on behalf of or about workers. Alarmingly, in Malayalam newspapers, out of the 48 samples selected, not even one article had a direct quote from workers. Malayalam newspapers, generally, had a low number of quotes related to migrant workers in the stories.

Duration of workers' and others voices

Given the caste and class context, workers hardly find space in prime time news or on the front page of a newspaper, but when it did happen, news media did not give them the space to speak for themselves.

In case of TV news, out of about 12 stories that had a direct quote from the worker, most quotes were 1-3 minutes long (Figure 7). In Malayalam TV news, almost all the quotes were less than a minute in length. In case of Kannada newspapers, out of the two stories that had quotes from workers, one had a single quote and the other had between 2-3 direct quotes. Malayalam newspapers had no direct quote from workers (Figure 8).

Who speaks for workers?

Those speaking on behalf of migrant workers or about them were political leaders from the ruling party, cabinet ministers, opposition political party leaders, government or administrative officials and/or experts like activists, representatives from civil society organisations, academicians, doctors, union leaders or lawyers. In case of TV news in both languages, it was the journalist reporting from the field who got the maximum air time to talk about workers (Figure 9). In Kannada newspapers, leaders from the ruling party in the state were quoted the most followed by experts like activists, representatives of civil society organisations, academicians, doctors, union leaders or lawyers. In case of Malayalam

newspapers, there were hardly any quotes in articles but among the few quotes, leaders from ruling political party got the maximum space (Figure 10).

Across news media of both languages, others got more space than workers themselves to talk about issues concerning workers. Amongst those speaking on behalf of migrant workers, it was mostly political leaders or cabinet ministers from the ruling party or experts like activists, representatives of civil society organisations, academicians, doctors, union leaders or lawyers. In most stories in Kannada TV news, others spoke for about 3-5 minutes or more than five minutes. In Malayalam TV news, most quotes from others were less than one minute long (Figure 11).

In Kannada newspapers, most quotes from others were either stand alone or between 2-3 in number. A few stories in Malayalam newspapers only had 4-5 quotes from others and no quotes whatsoever from workers themselves (Figure 12).

Gender representation

To understand gendered representation of migrant workers, we analysed their quotes, visuals or images and whether they were mentioned in the story. In case of Kannada news, there was almost equal representation of males and females in the reportage but, in Malayalam TV news, more male workers were represented in the stories. In case of Kannada newspapers, there was hardly any representation of workers in terms of quotes, images or specific mentions (Figure 13). Within the limited representation, only male workers were featured. In case of Malayalam newspapers, there were zero direct quotes from migrant workers, but they were represented through visuals or specific stories. There was almost equal representation provided to male and female workers in articles (Figure 14). It is important to note that across TV news and newspapers in both languages, there was no mention of castes or religions of migrant workers walking back home.

Homogenising migrant workers

There is a tendency to homogenise the worker. When workers were shown walking back home during the lockdown, it was not clear what work they do in the cities. Not all migrant workers do the same work. Some are contractual, some salaried while others are daily wage workers. The working conditions also determined the need or pressure to make certain decisions like walking back home for hundreds of kilometers. Majority of stories in both TV news and newspapers, particularly newspapers in both languages, did not mention the nature of occupation of these workers (Figures 15 and 16). This shows the news media's lack of understanding of nuances of labour issues in the country. It also highlights the approach of news media to issues, the culture of 'breaking news' and how dramatic visuals lend themselves to prime time news or make it to the front page.

Another way of homogenising the worker is to restrict the context in which their image is reproduced. It is important to note where the workers are shown in a news story. A worker is not just on the road, in need of help or desperate. They may also be at work or at home. In other words, a worker has many identities. But from the news media coverage it is clear that the worker was mostly shown on the road or in transport during this crisis. In Kannada TV news, workers were mostly shown on the road or in a transport facility. In Malayalam TV news, workers were mostly shown at work. In Kannada newspapers, most workers were shown on the road and, in Malayalam newspapers workers were mostly in a transport facility or on the road (Figures 17 and 18).

The study tries to understand if news media coverage provided any context to the story of migrant workers walking back home during the lockdown. For instance, questions like was any historical context provided on migration and workers, were sector-wise occupations mentioned, was there a distinction made between organised and unorganised sectors and was there any discussion about existing labour laws and structural conditions were

explored. The study reveals that a few stories in Kannada TV news did mention the historical context about migration and workers in the country. Some of the stories in both Kannada and Malayalam TV news mentioned different sector-wise occupations (Figure 19). There was only one story in both Kannada and Malayalam TV news that made the distinction between the organised and unorganised sectors and there was hardly any discussion about existing labour laws and structural conditions. In the case of Malayalam newspapers, there was some discussion about existing labour laws and structural conditions but there was hardly any historical context provided on the migration and labour in the country. Some of the Kannada newspapers did mention sector-wise occupations (Figure 20).

A worker has many identities. But from the news media coverage it is clear that the worker was mostly shown on the road or in transport during this crisis.

Figure 7: Duration of representation of workers' voices on TV news

Kannada TV news **Malayalam TV news**

Figure 8: Length of representation of workers' voices in newspapers

Kannada newspapers **Malayalam newspapers**

Figure 9: Representation on behalf of workers on TV news

Kannada TV news **Malayalam TV news**
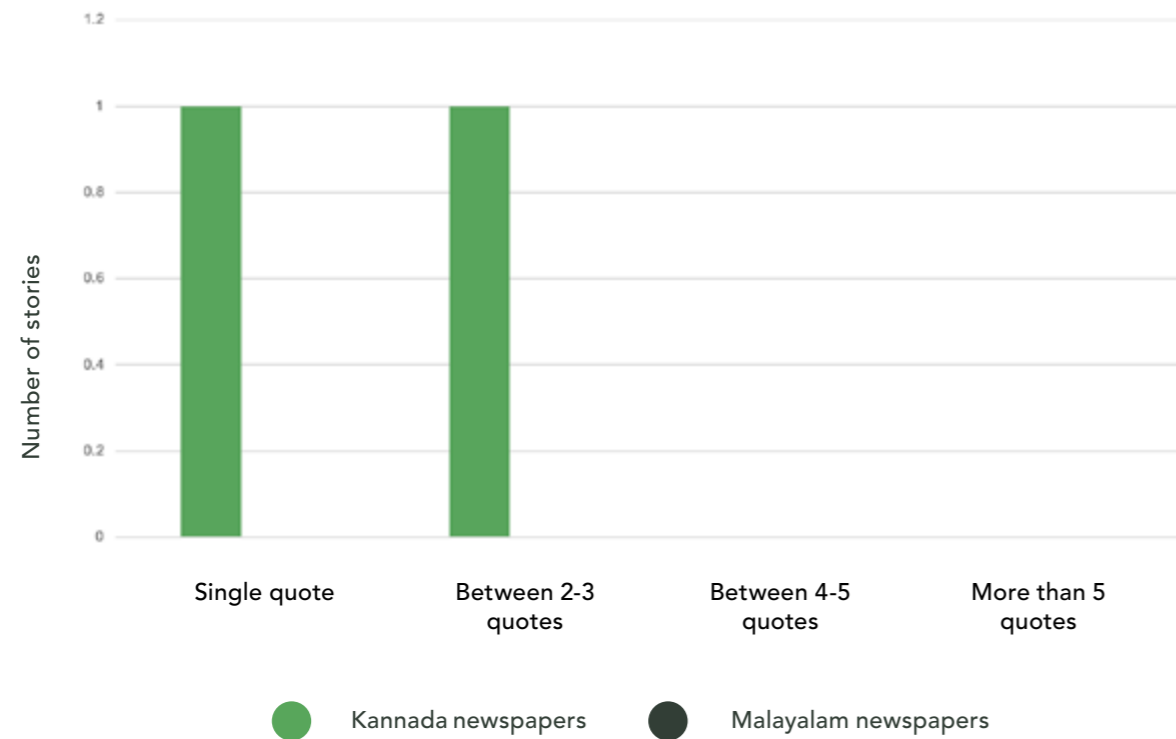
Figure 10: Representation on behalf of workers in newspapers

Kannada newspapers **Malayalam newspapers**
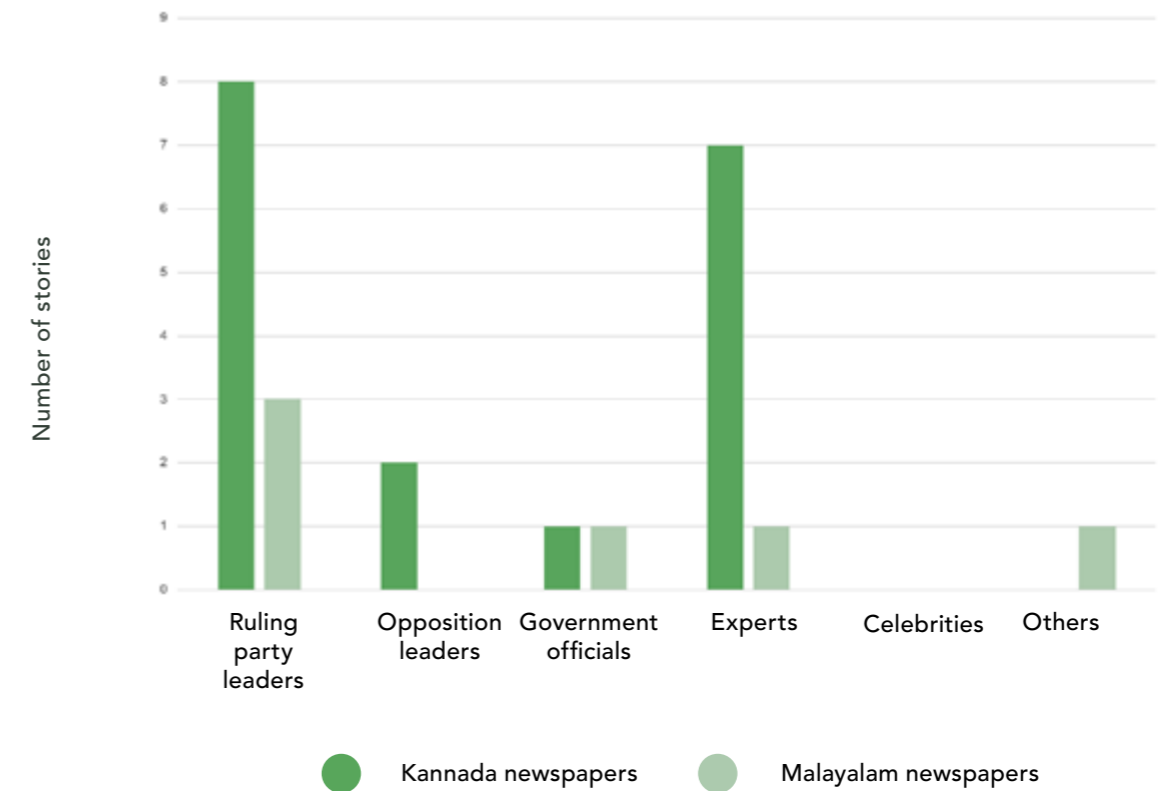
Figure 11: Duration of representation provided to others speaking on workers on TV news

Number of stories

| | Lesser than a minute | Between 1-3 minutes | Between 3-5 minutes | More than 5 minutes |

● Kannada TV news   ● Malayalam TV news
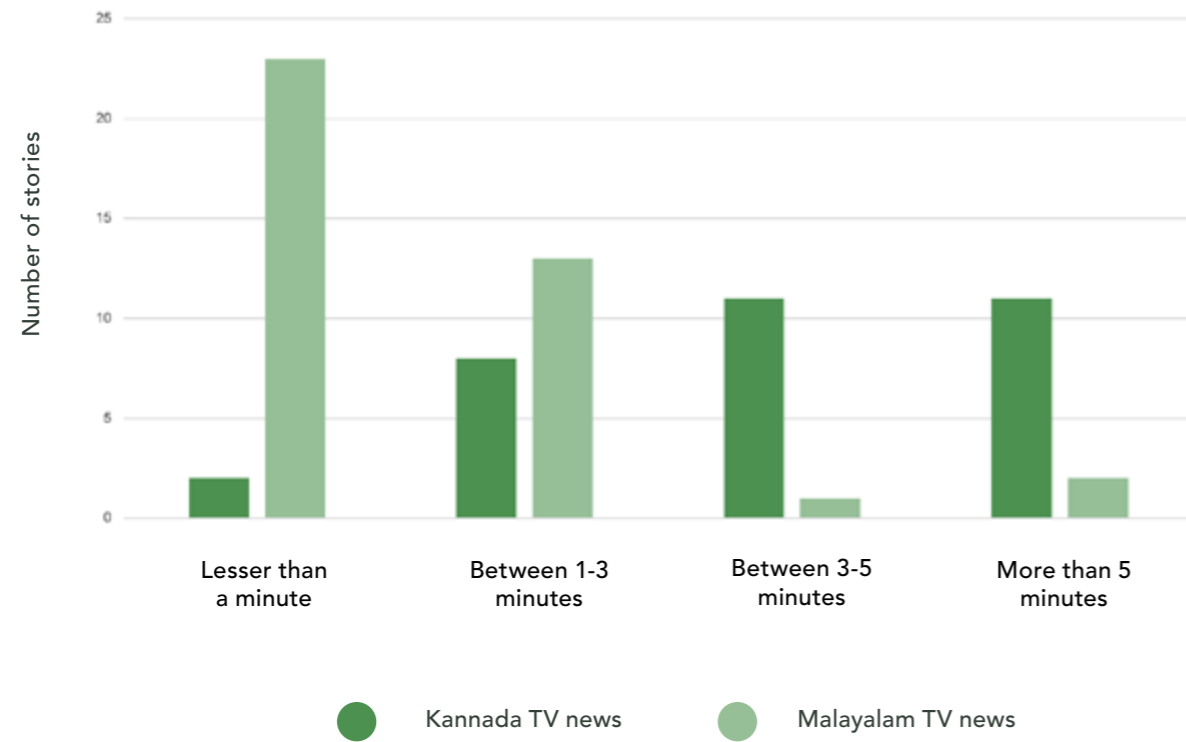
Figure 13: Gender-based representation of workers on TV news

Number of stories

Kannada TV news   Malayalam TV news

● Male   ● Female
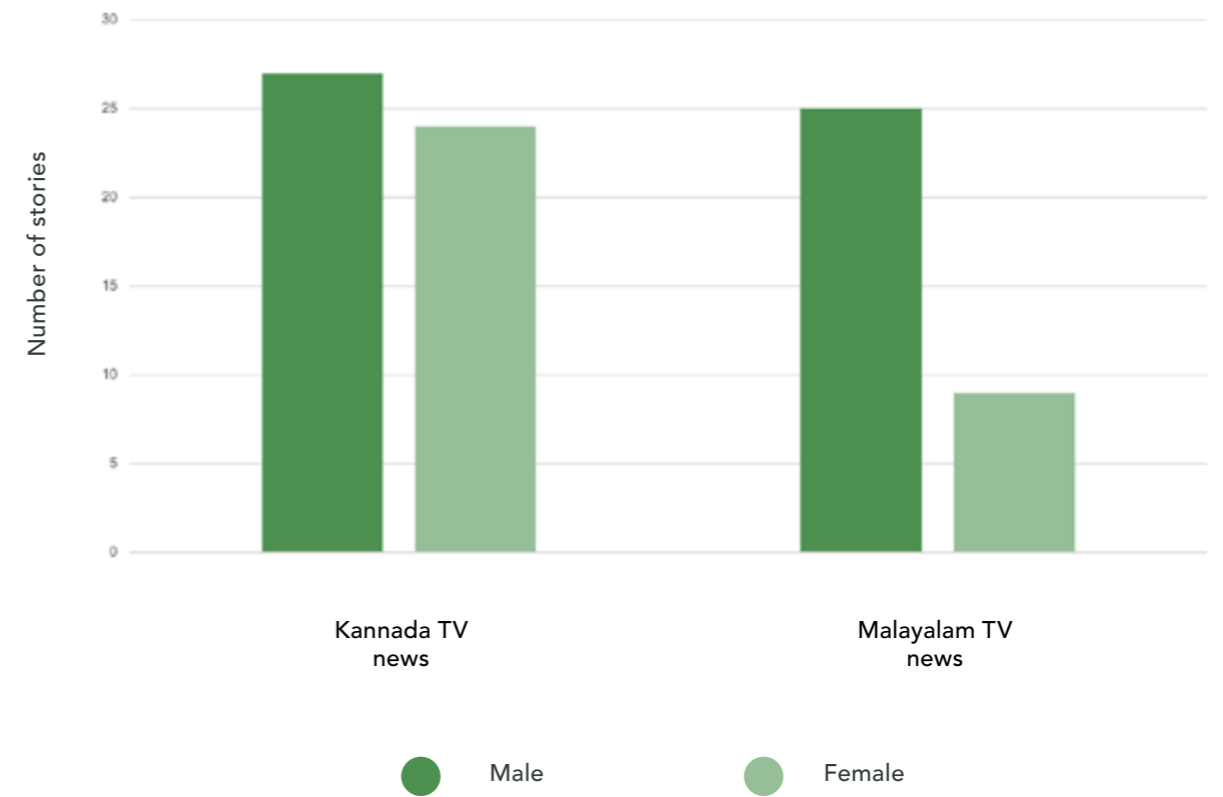
Figure 12: Representation given to others speaking on workers in newspapers

Number of stories

| Single quote | Between 2-3 quotes | Between 4-5 quotes | More than 5 quotes |

● Kannada newspapers   ● Malayalam newspapers
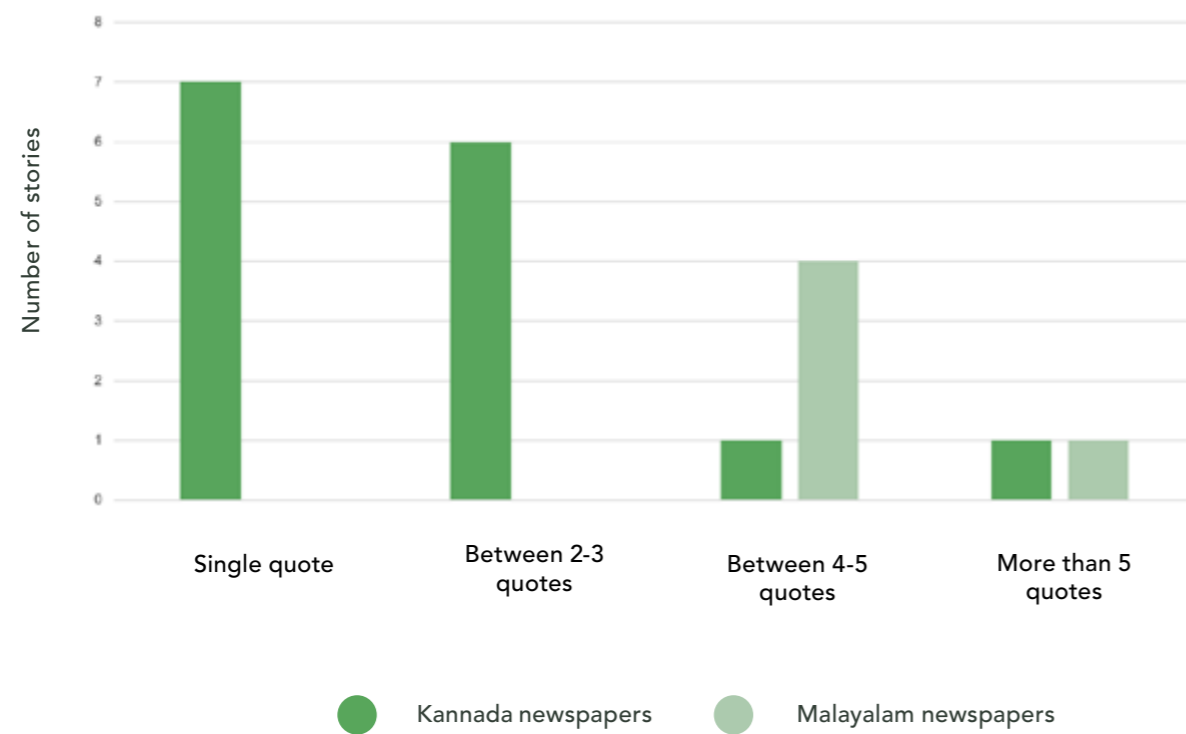
Figure 14: Gender-based representation of workers in newspapers

Number of stories

Kannada newspapers   Malayalam newspapers

● Male   ● Female
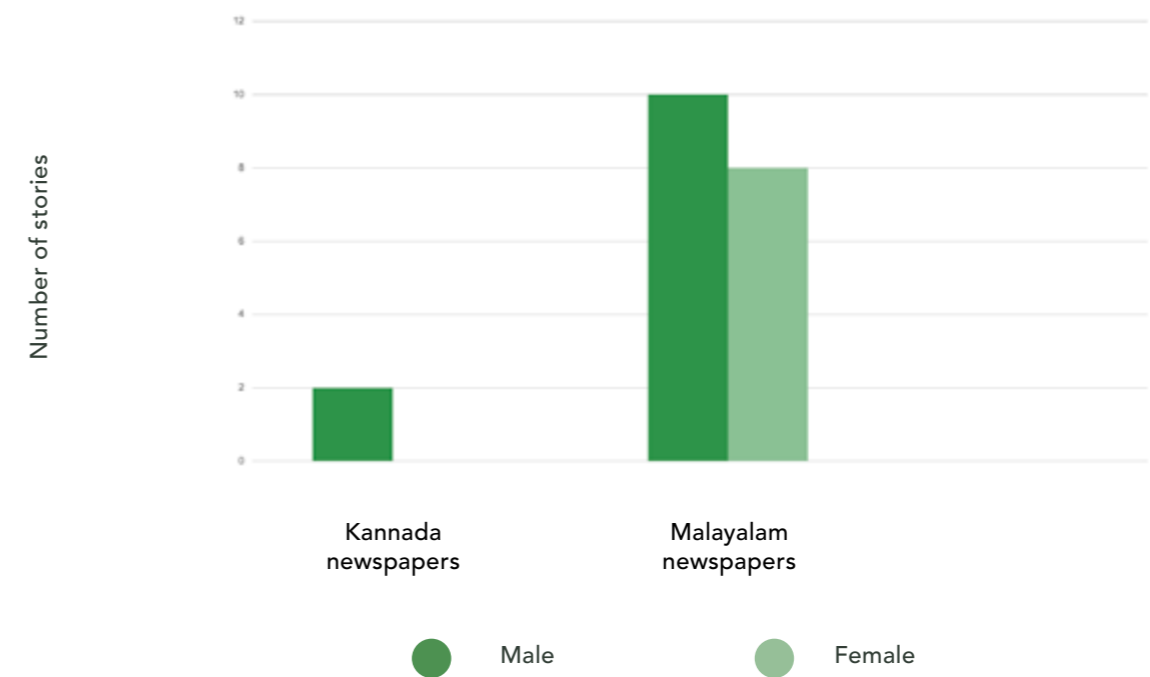
Figure 15: Mention of occupation of workers on TV news

Number of stories

- Kannada TV news
- Malayalam TV news

Figure 16: Mention of occupation of workers in newspapers

Number of stories

- Kannada newspapers
- Malayalam newspapers

Figure 17: Location and context of representation of workers on TV news

Number of stories

- Kannada TV news
- Malayalam TV news
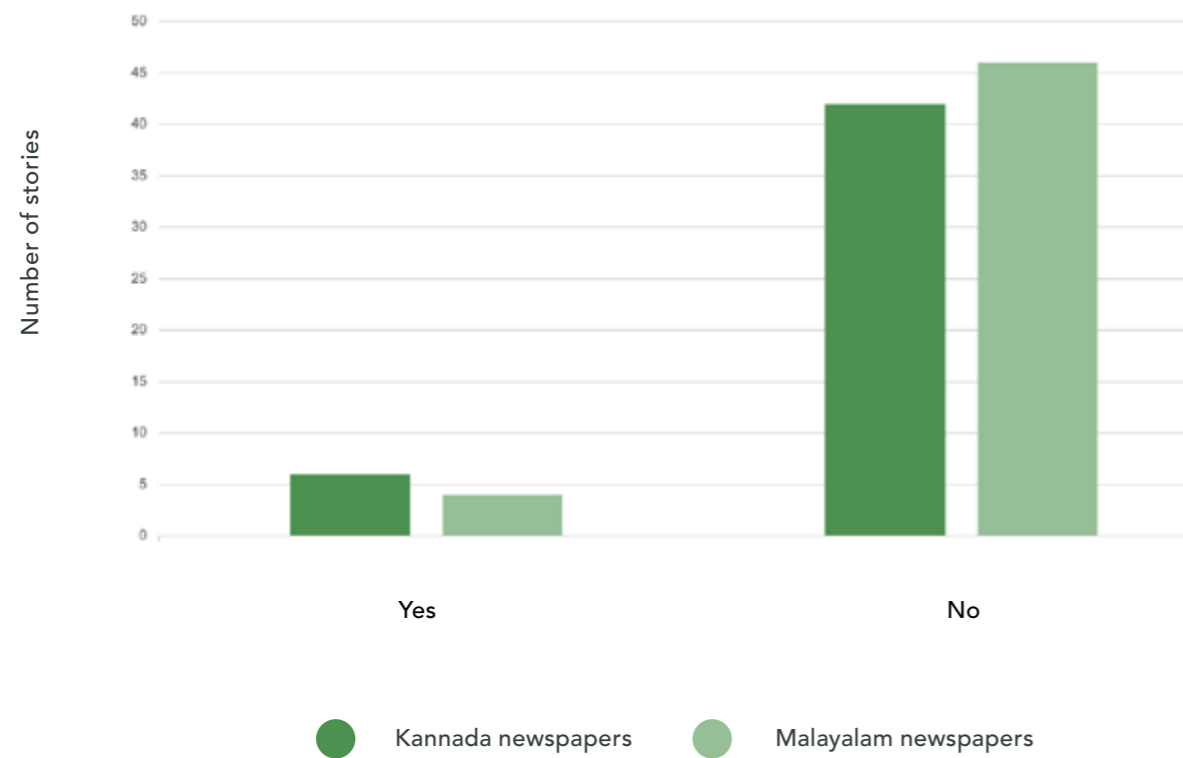
Figure 18: Location and context of representation of workers in newspapers

Number of stories

- Kannada newspapers
- Malayalam newspapers
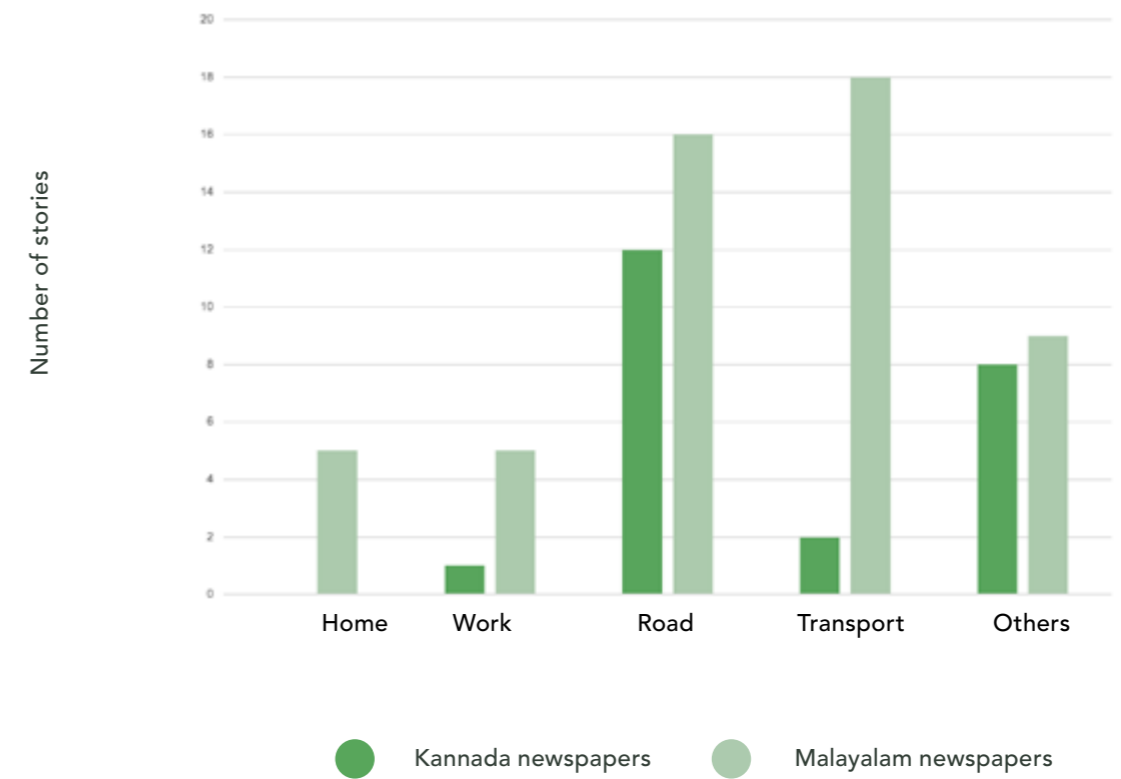
Figure 19: Contextualisation of migration stories on TV news

Number of stories

| | Historical context of immigration & workers | Sector - wise occupation is mentioned | Distinction between organised & unorganised sector | Discussion of present labour laws & structural conditions |

- Kannada TV news
- Malayalam TV news
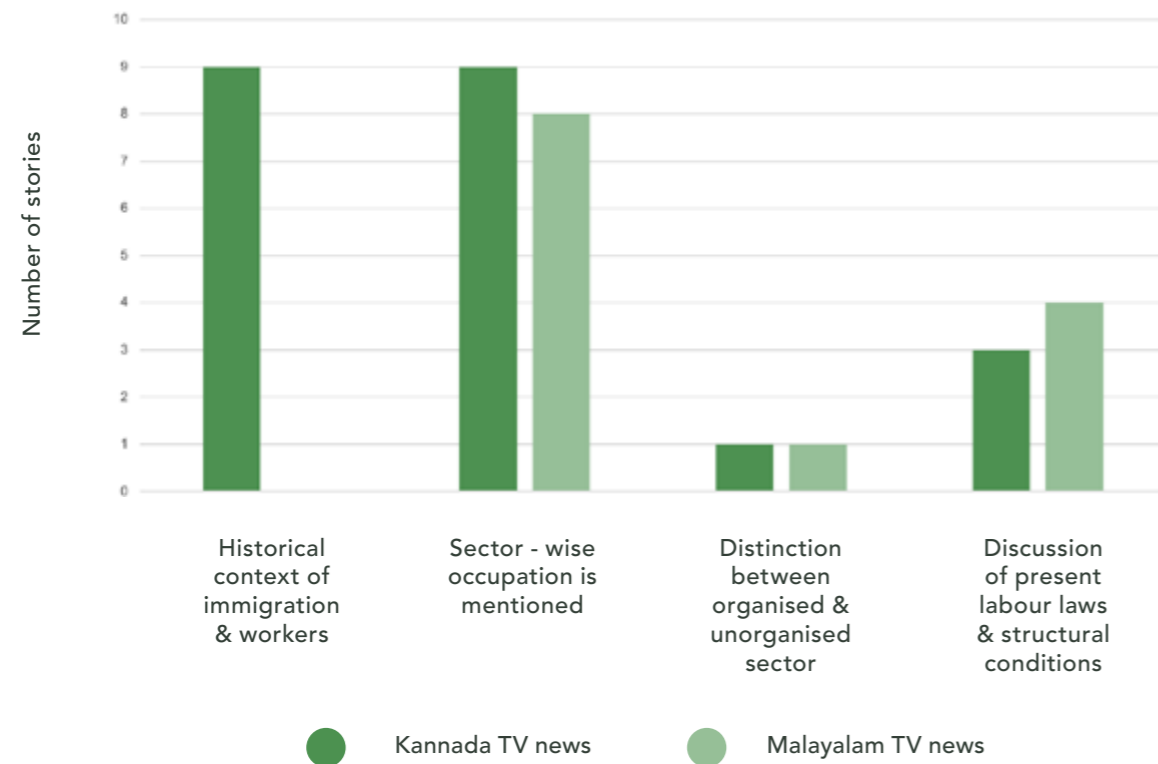
Figure 20: Contextualisation of migration stories in newspapers

Number of stories

| | Historical context of immigration & workers | Sector - wise occupation is mentioned | Distinction between organised & unorganised sector | Discussion of present labour laws & structural conditions |

- Kannada newspapers
- Malayalam newspapers
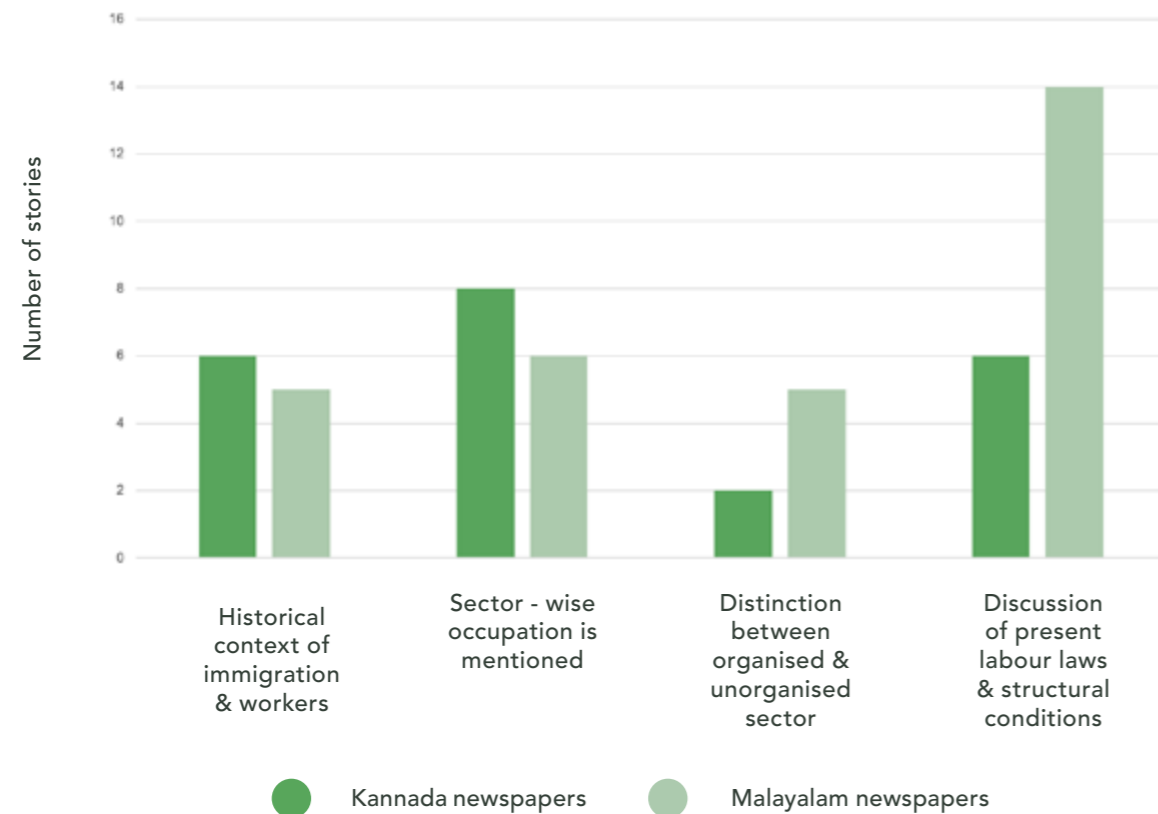
The media generally represented migrant workers as helpless or disempowered.

Worker as a 'victim' in crisis

These findings refer to the ways in which the emotional lives of migrant workers were represented by mainstream media. These include the various emotional states that workers experienced when they were trying to go back home either by public, private or hired transport or walking; or the emotional states experienced by workers who decided to or were forced to, for various reasons, to stay back in the states they had come to work. This section also attempts to investigate whether the media tries to associate migrant workers with an emotional identity such as a victim, survivor and so on. The latter type of framing is typically used to represent migrant workers collectively, thereby framing the entire segment on TV or in the entire report in the newspaper.

Representation of emotions

News coverage had an emotional tone to stories about migrant workers during the lockdown. They were covered as 'human interest' stories. Hence, workers were mostly represented with emotions like sad or scared which contributed to creating the image of workers as 'victims' (Figures 21 and 22). As it is clear from the data, in TV news in both languages, migrant workers were mostly represented as sad, in need of aid, scared and irresponsible. In case of Kannada newspapers, migrant workers were mostly represented as in need of aid, scared or angry. Most Malayalam newspapers represented them as in need of aid, sad, scared. But a few also represented them as happy, calm and courageous.

Descriptions of workers

It is important to observe words used by the media to describe migrant workers as that also shapes the perspective of the audience or readers. In both Kannada and Malayalam TV news, the most prominent word used

to describe workers during this crisis was 'victims' (Figure 23). A few stories also called them 'ignorant'. In case of newspapers in both languages, again, the most prominent word used to describe migrant workers was 'victims', followed by 'survivors' (Figure 24). Some of them also called them 'ignorant'. Overall, it is clear from the data that the representation of migrant workers by news media in both languages lacked sensitivity and nuance. There was very little space given to workers to represent themselves. Often, others were seen speaking on behalf of them. Especially in newspapers, there were very few quotes in general, and there were hardly any direct quotes from workers. Within the bleak representation of migrant workers, the gender ratio was highly skewed. Caste and religion were not mentioned at all. The worker walking back home was a generic figure in need of help, and was sad, scared and helpless. They were mostly described as 'victims'. In the coverage, there wasn't any context provided to the issue of migration and labour in the country. The coverage was mostly focused on the here and now without looking at the historical context or even questioning the existing structural conditions that contributed to the crisis.

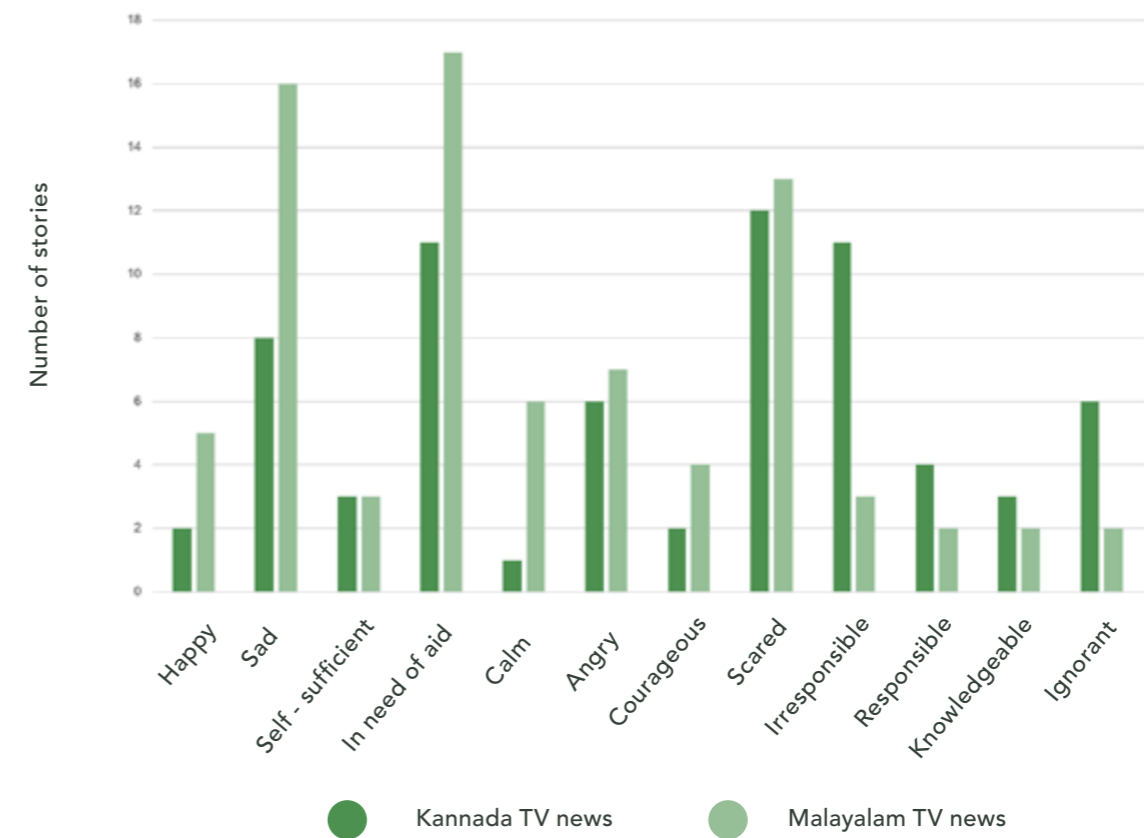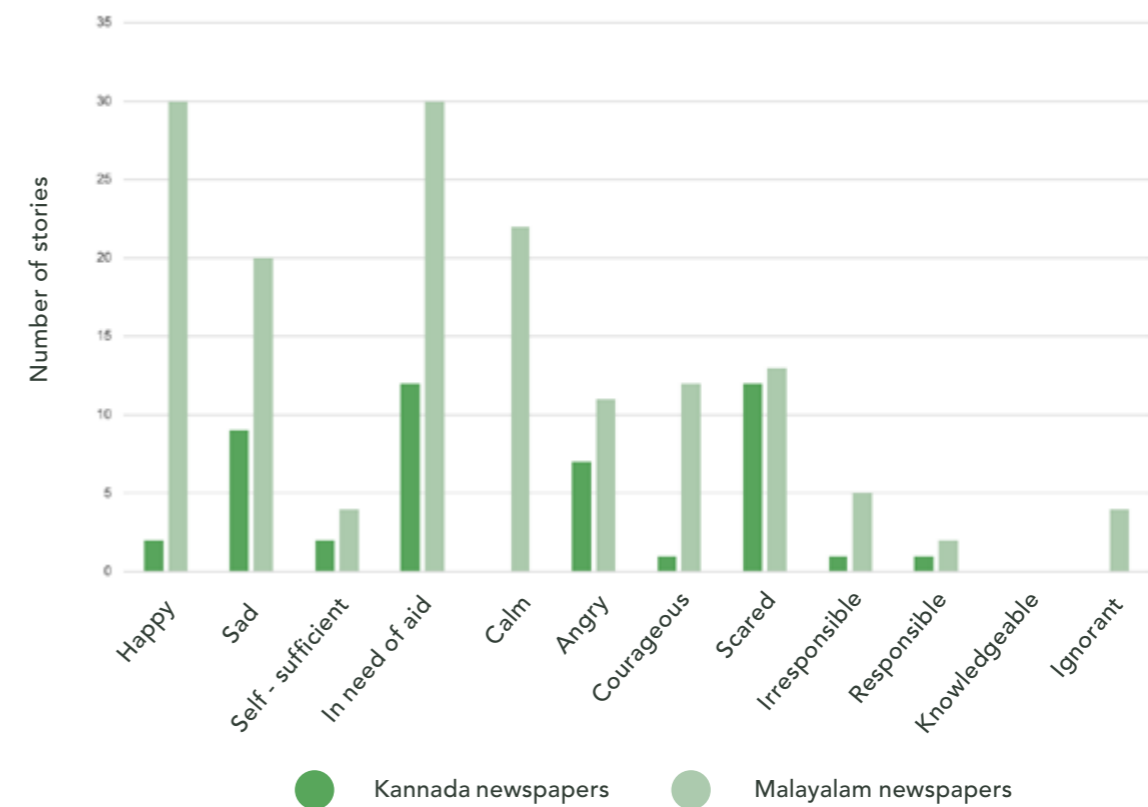## Figure 21: Representation of emotions of workers on TV news

Number of stories

● Kannada TV news ● Malayalam TV news

Figure 22: Representation of emotions of workers in newspapers

Number of stories

● Kannada newspapers ● Malayalam newspapers

Figure 23: Words used to describe workers on TV news

Kannada TV news ●   ○ Malayalam TV news
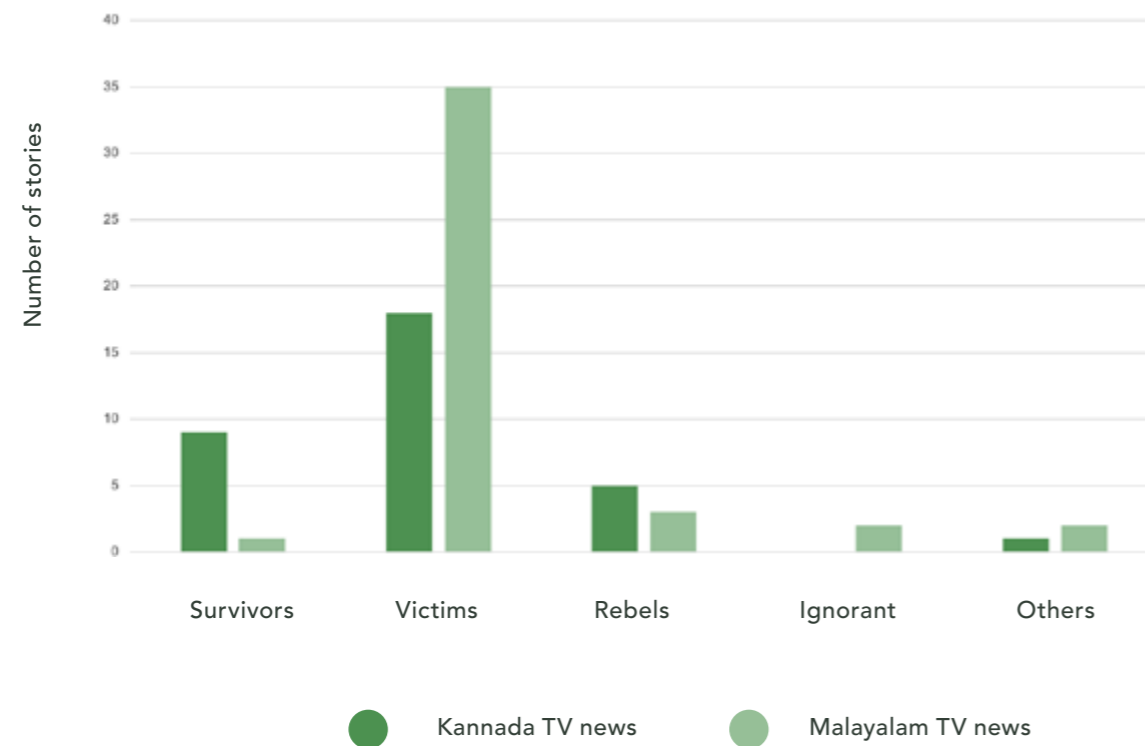
Figure 24: Words used to describe workers in newspapers

Kannada newspapers ●   ○ Malayalam newspapers

Social and economic dimensions of labour
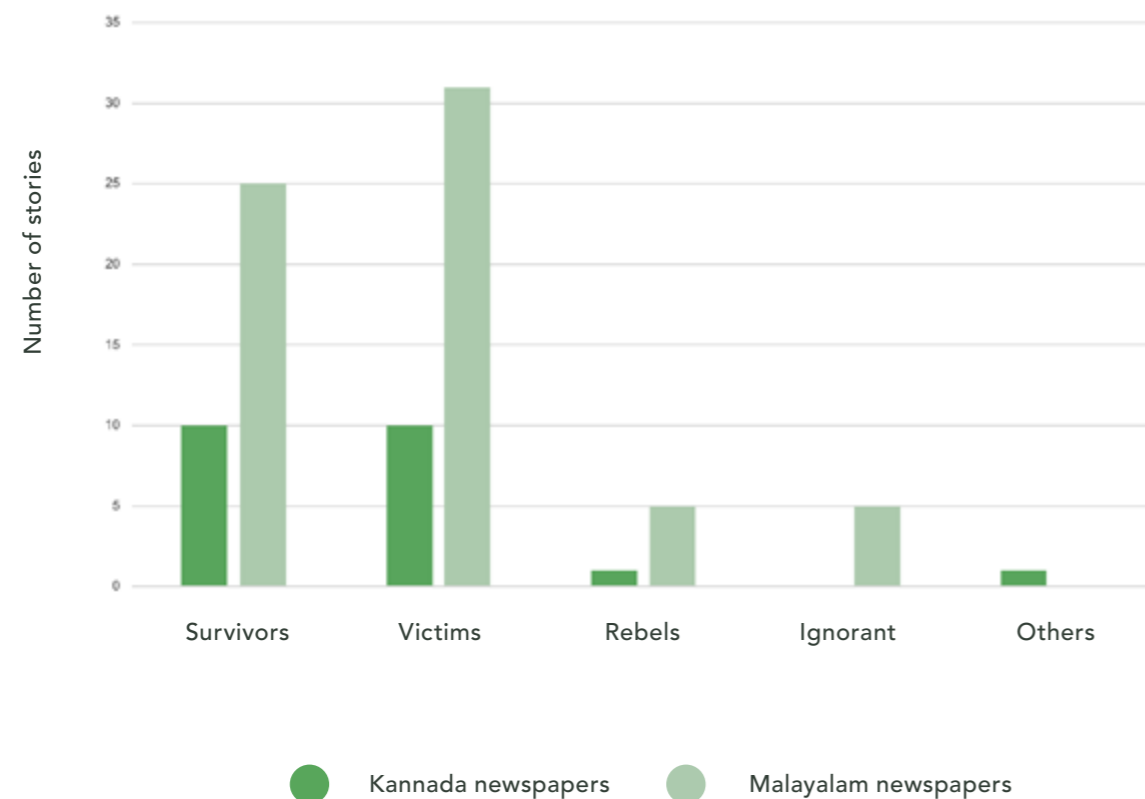
The lockdown in early to mid-2020 exposed the extent to which migrant workers were absent in government strategies for emergencies. Due to the announcement of the total lockdown including public transport, migrant workers were not given time to decide if they wished to go back home. Many who stayed back were not able to source food or even drinking water. Most migrant workers are employed through a complex but informal contracting system. During the lockdown, workers did not get paid by their sub-contractors, many of whom were themselves not able to collect required payments from companies that hired them.

Thus, the migrant worker crisis was experienced on multiple levels, both social and economic. These findings investigate the extent to which these social and economic aspects were covered by the media in their stories on migrant workers.

Discussion of social issues

The crisis during the lockdown brought to surface multiple social issues faced by migrant workers. The study analysed which issues were given prominence in news coverage. The data reveals that among all the issues that workers faced, immediate needs were provided most coverage (Figures 25 and 26). For example, Kannada TV news mostly focused on the issue of lack of food and water followed by living conditions and lack of transport. Malayalam TV news gave the most amount of coverage to the issue of lack of transport during the crisis. Interestingly, in the case of Kannada newspapers, there was relatively less coverage of social issues faced by workers compared to Malayalam newspapers. However, the trends were similar for newspapers in both languages - a focus on working conditions and lack of transport.

Discussion of economic issues

The crisis also highlighted economic issues faced by migrant workers. Again, more coverage was given to immediate needs. There was very little coverage on TV news and in newspapers in both languages about non-payment of wages and migrant workers getting low wages for their work (Figures 27 and 28). Existing structural issues around labour and migration received little to no coverage from television news and newspapers in both languages. Kannada TV news mostly spoke about problems faced by migrant workers due to lack of cash followed by the issue of unemployment during the lockdown. Comparatively speaking, Malayalam TV news covered the problem of unemployment during the lockdown followed by the issue of lack of cash. Kannada news channels offered little coverage to economic issues faced by migrant workers. This was also seen in the case of social issues covered by Kannada newspapers. Overall, Kannada newspapers covered less of social and economic issues compared to their counterparts in TV news. Malayalam newspapers covered issues of lack of cash, remittances provided to migrant workers and the issue of unemployment.

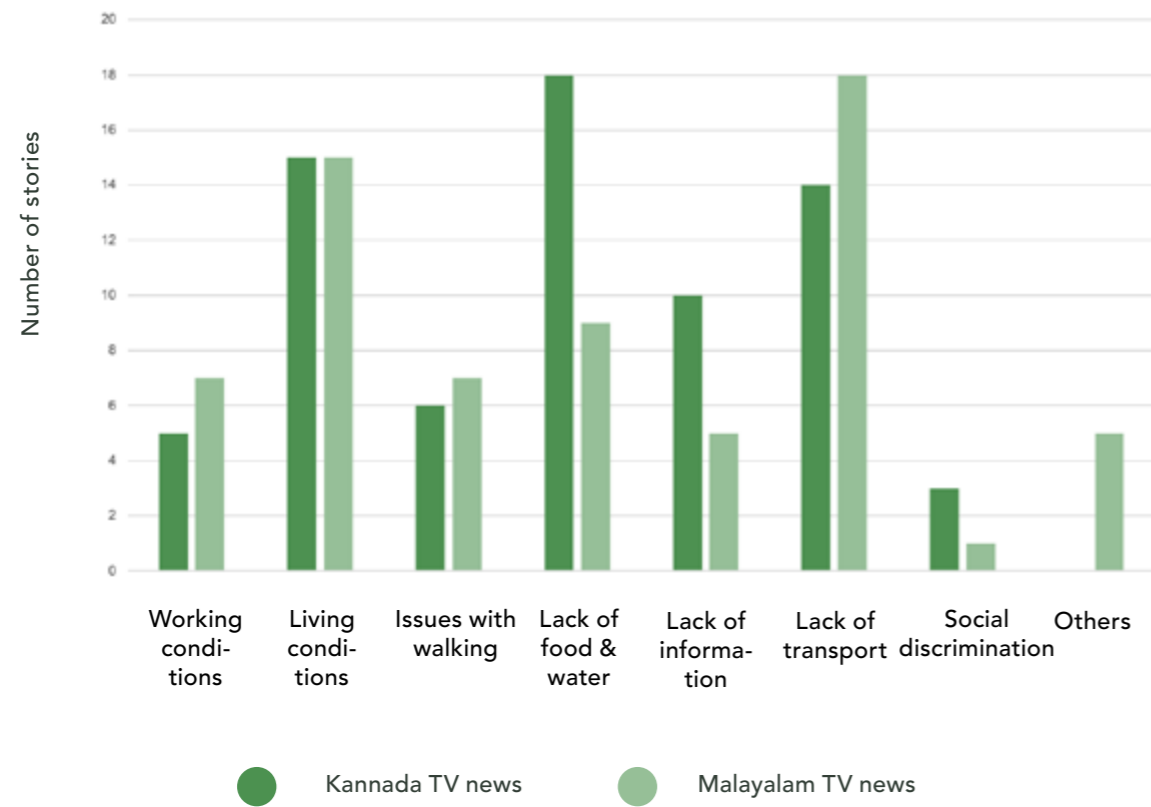## Figure 25: Mention of social issues faced by workers on TV news

Number of stories (y-axis)

- Working conditions: Kannada TV news 5, Malayalam TV news 7
- Living conditions: Kannada TV news 15, Malayalam TV news 15
- Issues with walking: Kannada TV news 6, Malayalam TV news 7
- Lack of food & water: Kannada TV news 18, Malayalam TV news 9
- Lack of information: Kannada TV news 10, Malayalam TV news 5
- Lack of transport: Kannada TV news 14, Malayalam TV news 18
- Social discrimination: Kannada TV news 3, Malayalam TV news 1
- Others: Malayalam TV news 5

● Kannada TV news   ● Malayalam TV news

Figure 26: Mention of social issues faced by workers in newspapers

Number of stories (y-axis)

- Working conditions: Kannada newspapers 12, Malayalam newspapers 28
- Living conditions: Kannada newspapers 10, Malayalam newspapers 28
- Issues with walking: Kannada newspapers 7, Malayalam newspapers 16
- Lack of food & water: Kannada newspapers 4, Malayalam newspapers 28
- Lack of information: Kannada newspapers 2, Malayalam newspapers 13
- Lack of transport: Kannada newspapers 13, Malayalam newspapers 27
- Social discrimination: Malayalam newspapers 14
- Others

● Kannada newspapers   ● Malayalam newspapers

Figure 27: Mention of economic issues faced by workers on TV news

Number of stories (x-axis)

- Lack of cash: Malayalam TV news 11, Kannada TV news 15
- Remittances: Malayalam TV news 1
- Unemployment: Malayalam TV news 13, Kannada TV news 10
- Low wages: Kannada TV news 1
- Non-payment of wages: Kannada TV news 3

● Kannada TV news   ● Malayalam TV news

Figure 28: Mention of economic issues faced by workers in newspapers

Number of stories (x-axis)

- Lack of cash: Kannada newspapers 8, Malayalam newspapers 33
- Remittances: Malayalam newspapers 26
- Unemployment: Kannada newspapers 6, Malayalam newspapers 24
- Low wages: Kannada newspapers 2, Malayalam newspapers 17
- Non-payment of wages: Malayalam newspapers 18

● Kannada newspapers   ● Malayalam newspapers
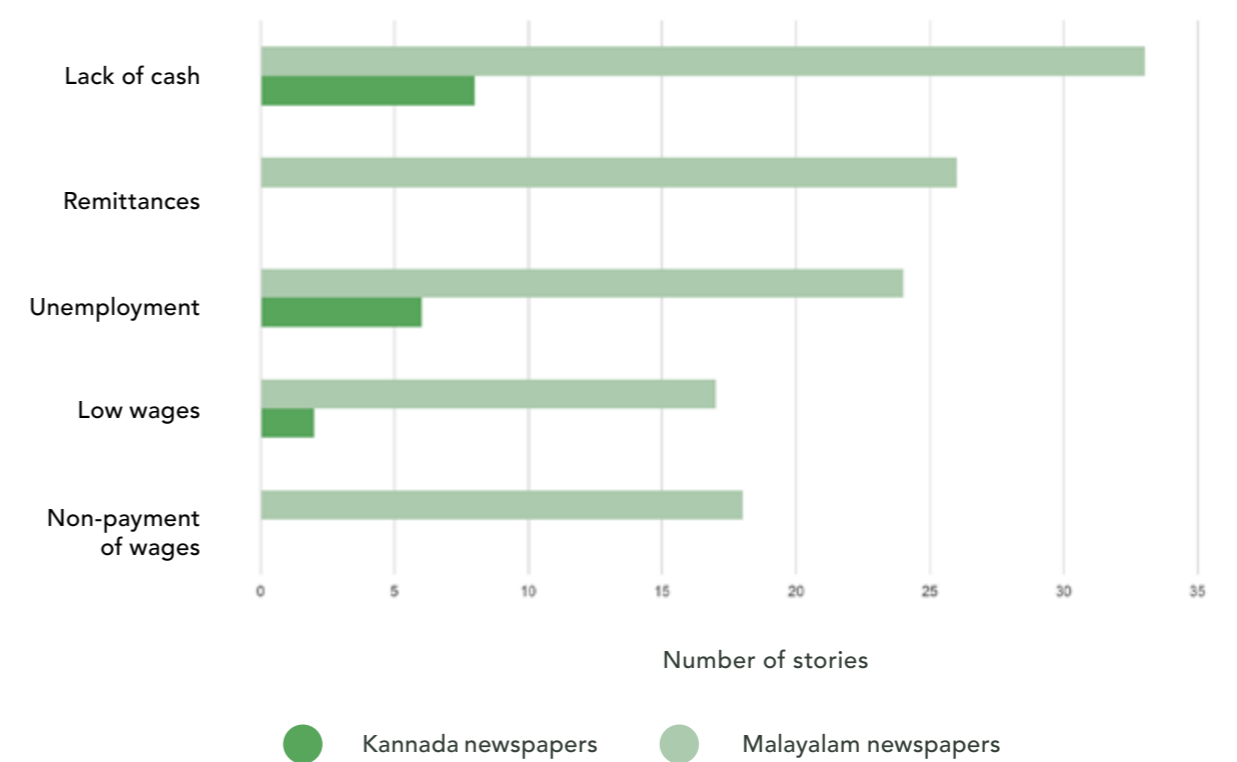
Governance and Labour Legislation

Holding the state accountable

As both mainstream and social media accounts began to showcase large-scale confusion, fear, anxiety and the hardships faced by migrant workers, the central government announced several measures in an attempt to both remedy the situation and to redeem its own image in the public sphere. This section seeks to investigate whether the media reported on these various government measures and schemes designed to mitigate issues that migrant workers faced during the lockdown. The first finding refers to whether mainstream media reported on government schemes and administrative measures to address migrant workers during the lockdown. Towards late 2020, the central government also pushed through a rather drastic change in labour laws. These modifications were proposed by the government as a much needed, long overdue 'reform' that would not only drive economic growth but also help workers in various ways. The second finding refers to whether mainstream media reported on the so-called labour reforms in late 2020.

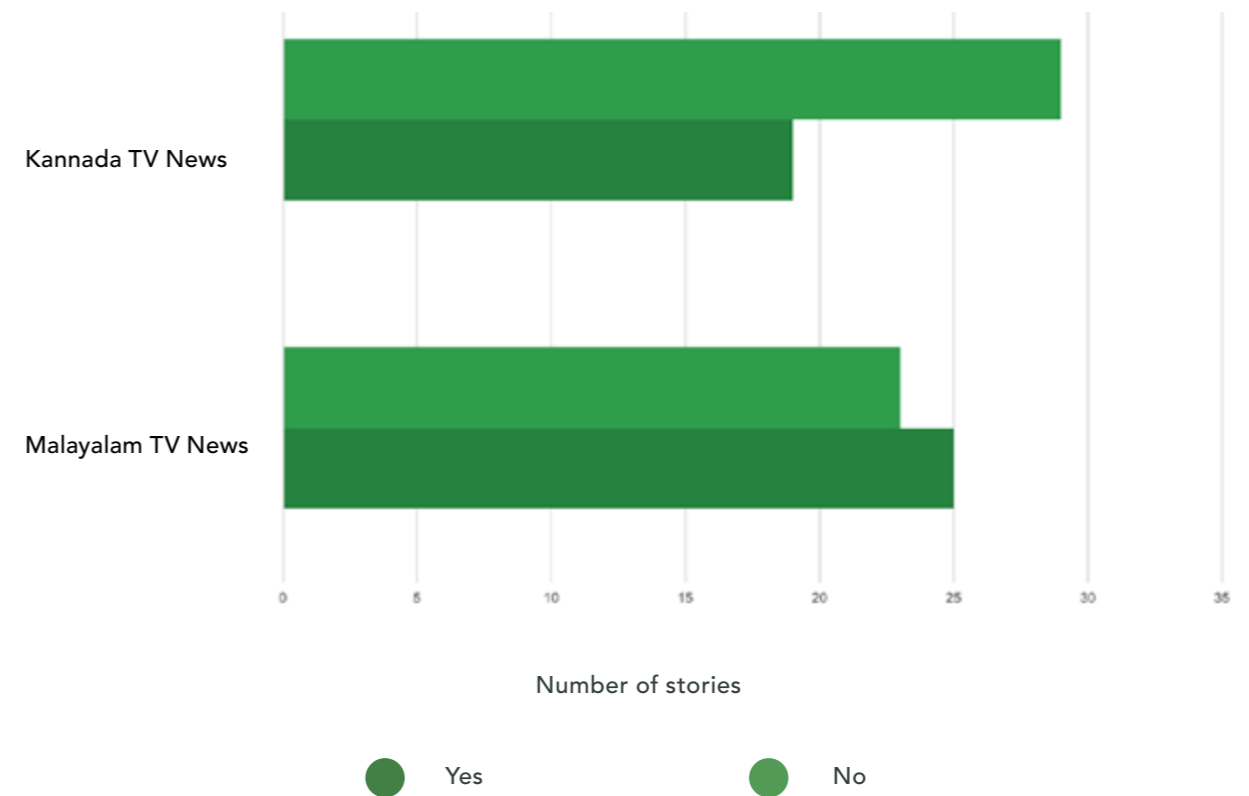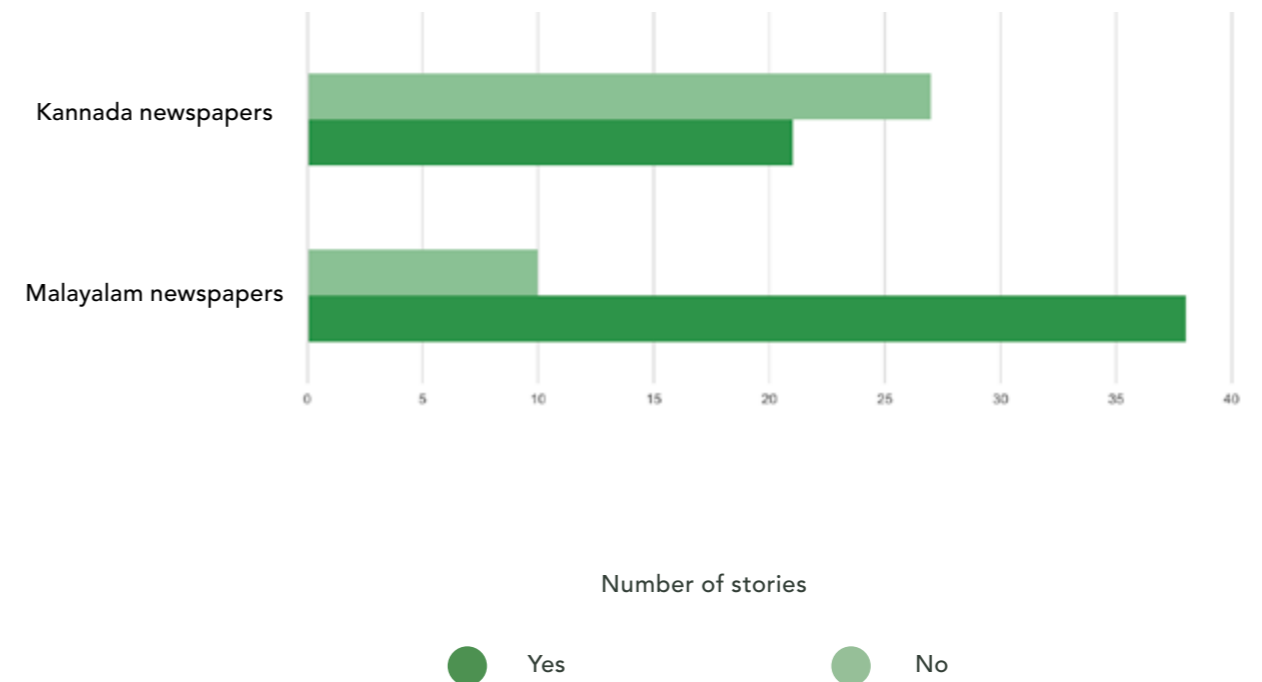**Figure 29: Mention of government schemes on TV news**

Number of stories

● Yes   ● No

Figure 30: Mention of government schemes in newspapers

Number of stories

● Yes   ● No

Government schemes and administrative measures

In case of television news, Malayalam TV news channels had nearly an equal number of stories where government schemes and measures were covered compared to stories where such schemes were not mentioned (Figures 29 and 30). In comparison, Kannada TV news had many more stories that did not cover government measures than stories that did. It is interesting to observe that while Malayalam TV news covered schemes and measures proposed by the government during the lockdown for migrant workers, they hardly mentioned any discrepancy in administrative measures during this time. It is worse in the case of newspapers. Kannada newspapers covered the schemes and measures announced by the government but there was almost no mention of any discrepancy in government and administrative measures (Figures 31 and 32).

Labour reforms

As it is clear from Figures 33 and 34, changes in labour laws were hardly covered by any news media in both languages. If coverage across mediums and languages is compared, it is Malayalam newspapers that most discussed these changes in labour laws. It is important to note that migrant workers became 'news' when they started walking back home for lack of food and cash in cities. There were dramatic visuals and a spectacle was created. There was a victim figure to report about. But a few months later, when labour laws that affected the same workers were modified, there was hardly any coverage. It is clear from this that the news value was restricted to immediate and dramatic visuals or 'breaking news'. There seems to be little interest in reporting on structural changes that have long-term effects on workers. Overall, there is no interest from news media in covering conditions that led to the crisis of workers migrating during the lockdown or asking deeper questions and seeking accountability from the system.

Since there was hardly any coverage of changes in labour laws, there was even less mention of gaps in labour reforms. Comparatively, Malayalam newspapers provided little more coverage than their Kannada counterparts on gaps in labour reforms (Figures 35 and 36).

Yet again, workers found no space in news media in both languages to talk about an issue that directly impacts them (Figures 37 and 38). Within the limited coverage of labour reforms in news media in the two languages, it was the journalist on the ground who got maximum air time on TV news. Malayalam TV news had two direct quotes from workers. But otherwise, no other media spoke to workers directly about changes in labour laws. In case of newspapers, it was mostly leaders from the ruling party and experts who spoke about it.

As is seen from Figures 39 and 40, there was hardly any discussion in the news media about the impact of changes in labour laws. Kannada TV news did not provide any coverage on the impact of changes in labour laws while Malayalam TV news mentioned it exactly twice in their coverage. Newspapers, especially Malayalam newspapers, fared a little better with a few mentions regarding the impact of modifications in labour laws.

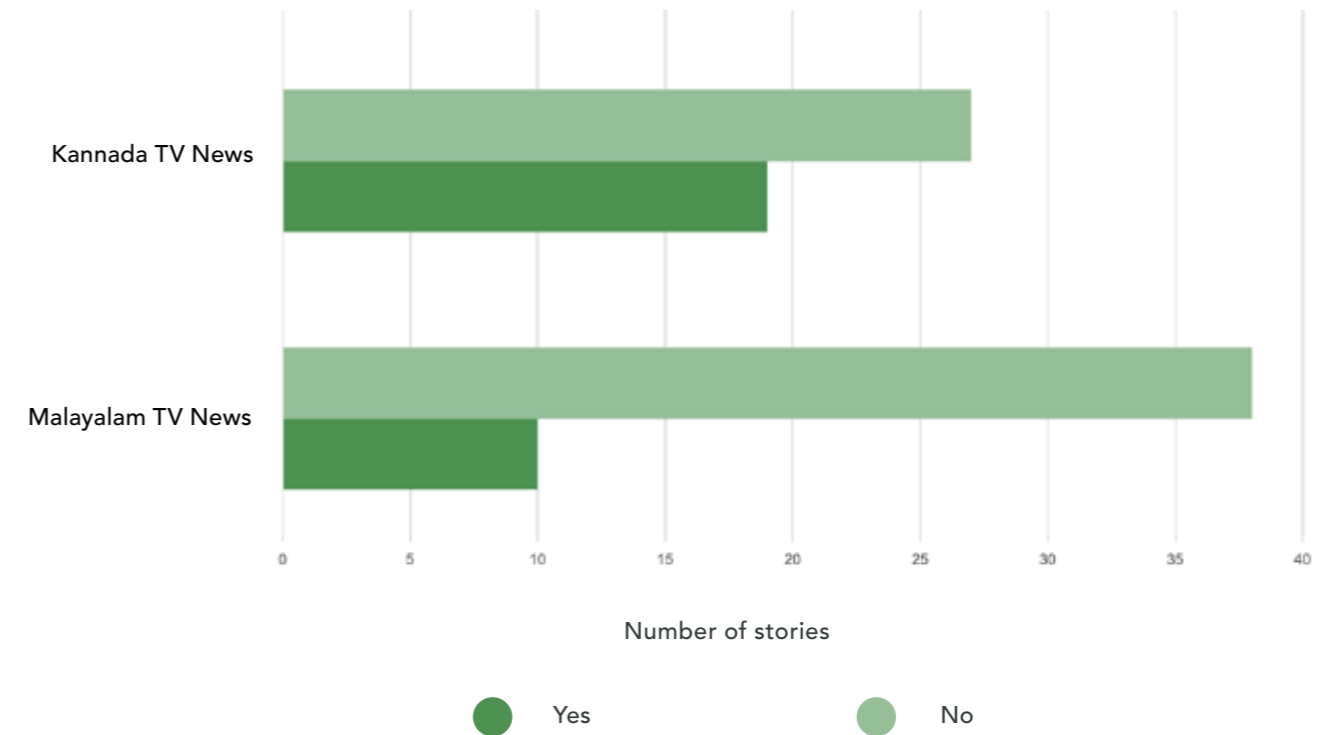**Figure 31: Mention of discrepancies in government schemes and administrative measures on TV news**
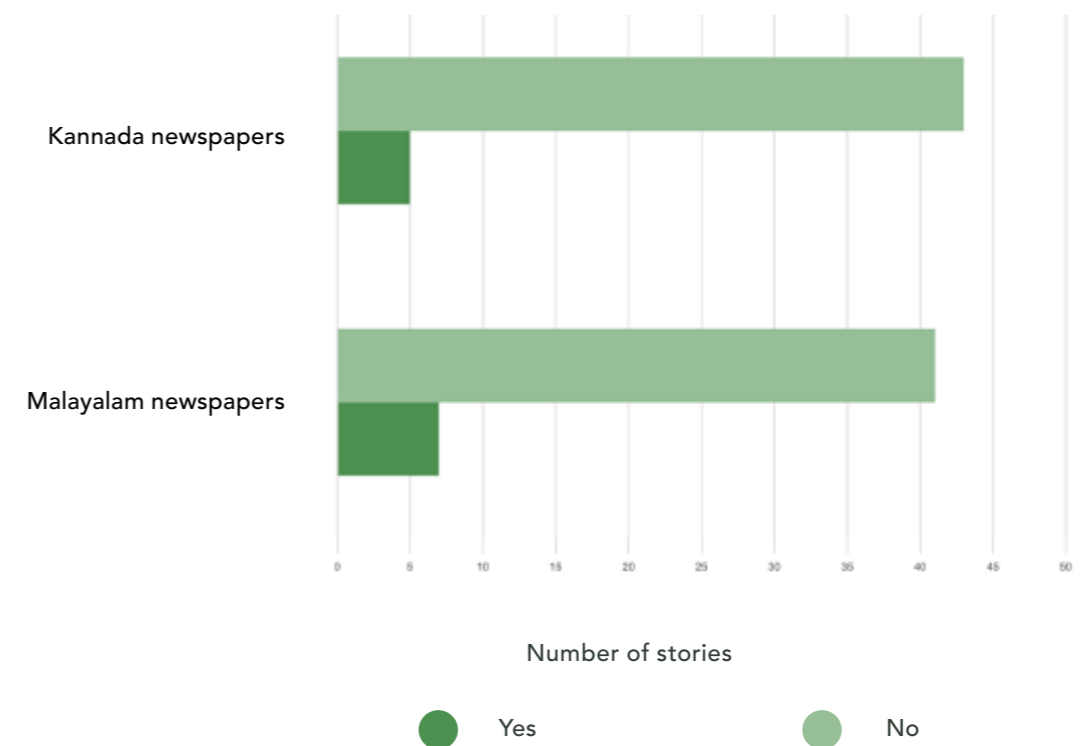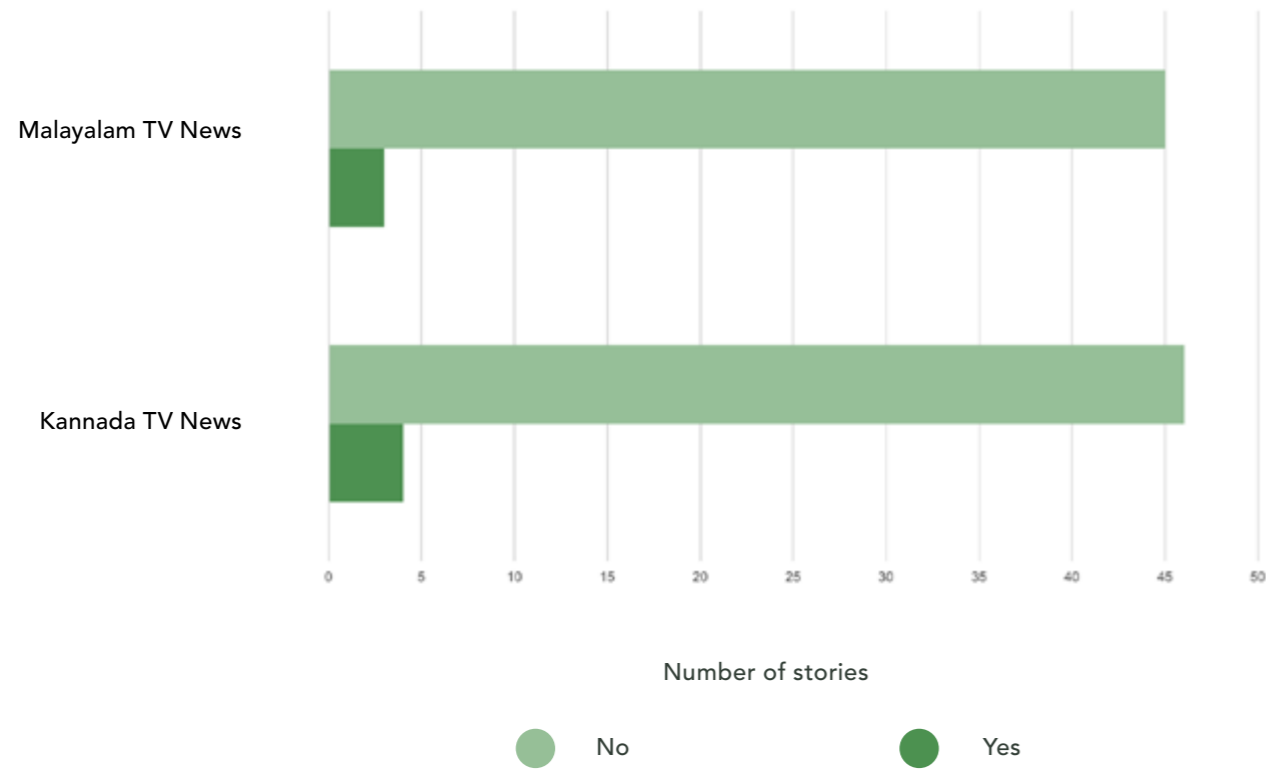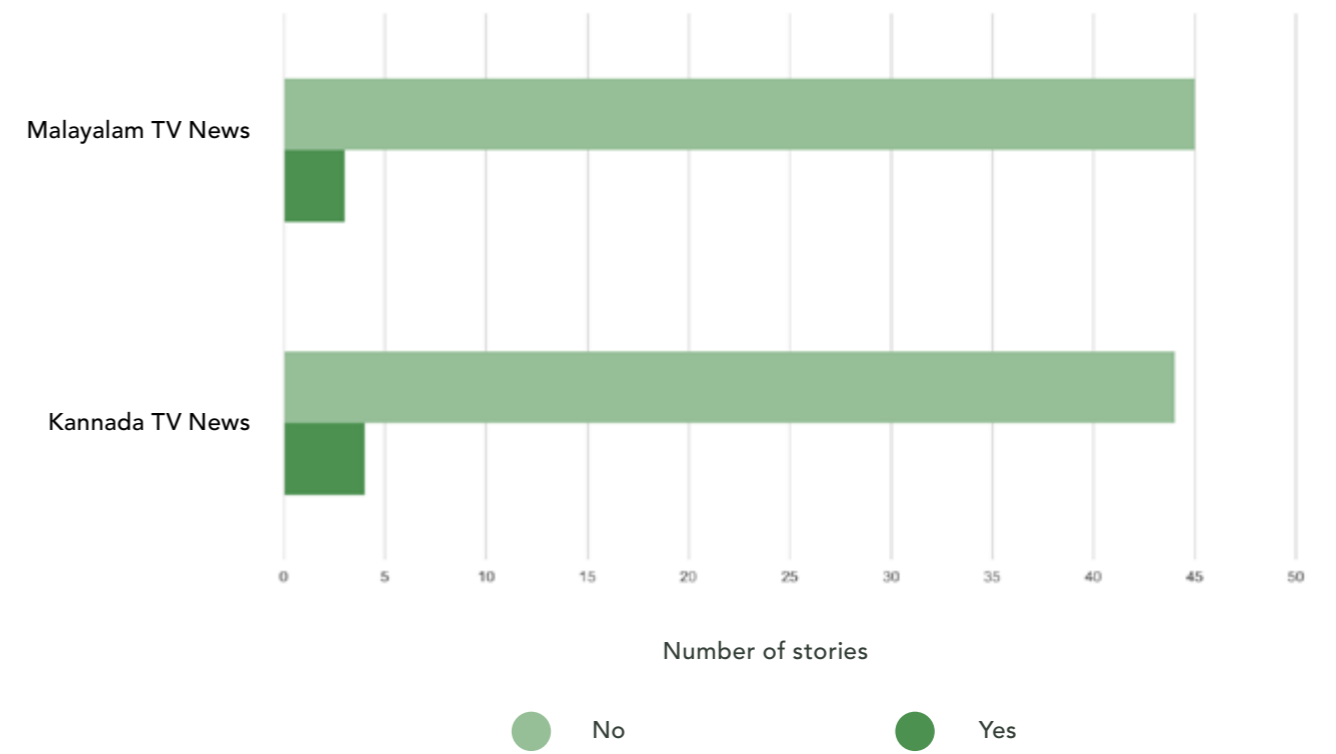

Figure 32: Mention of discrepancies in government schemes and administrative measures in newspapers

Figure 33: Mention of labour reforms announced by government on TV news

Number of stories

● No   ● Yes

Figure 35: Mention of gaps in labour reforms on TV news

Number of stories

● No   ● Yes

Figure 34: Mention of labour reforms announced by government in newspapers

Number of stories

● No   ● Yes
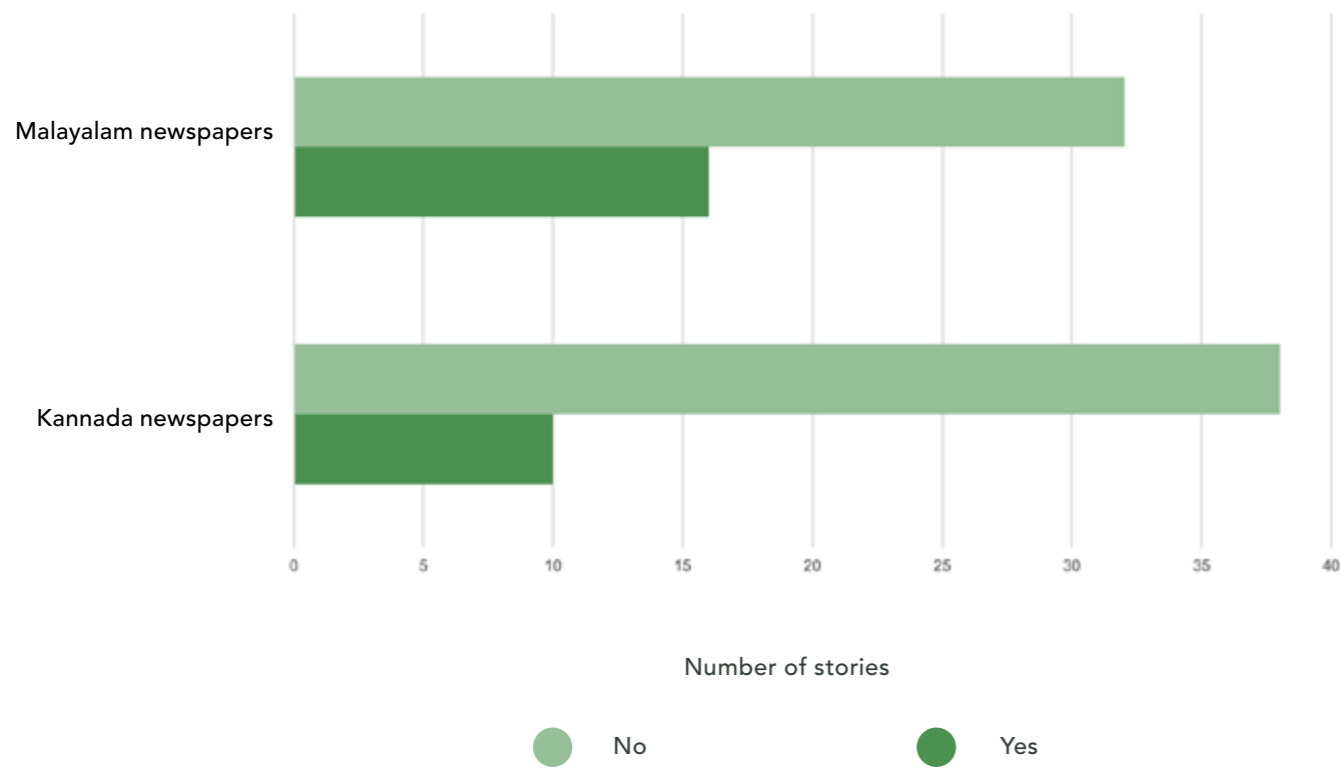
Figure 36: Mention of gaps in labour reforms in newspapers

Number of stories

● No   ● Yes
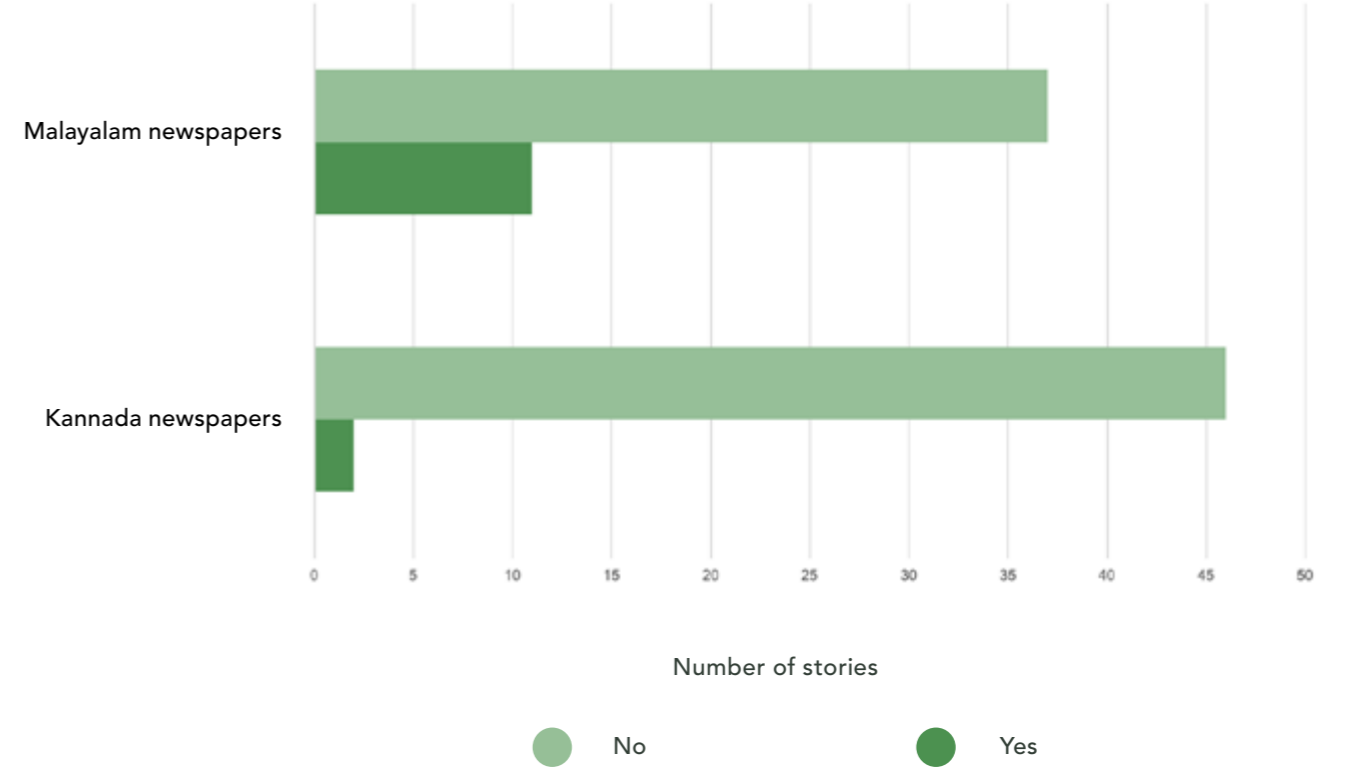
Figure 37: Types of individuals being quoted on labour reforms on TV news

Number of stories

Workers · Ruling party leaders · Opposition leaders · Government officials · Experts · Reporters · Others

● Malayalam TV news   ● Kannada TV news

Figure 38: Types of individuals being quoted on labour reforms in newspapers

Number of stories

Workers · Ruling party leaders · Opposition leaders · Government officials · Experts · Others

● Malayalam newspapers   ● Kannada newspapers

Figure 39: Mention of impact of labour reforms on TV News

Malayalam TV News

Kannada TV News

Number of stories

● No   ● Yes
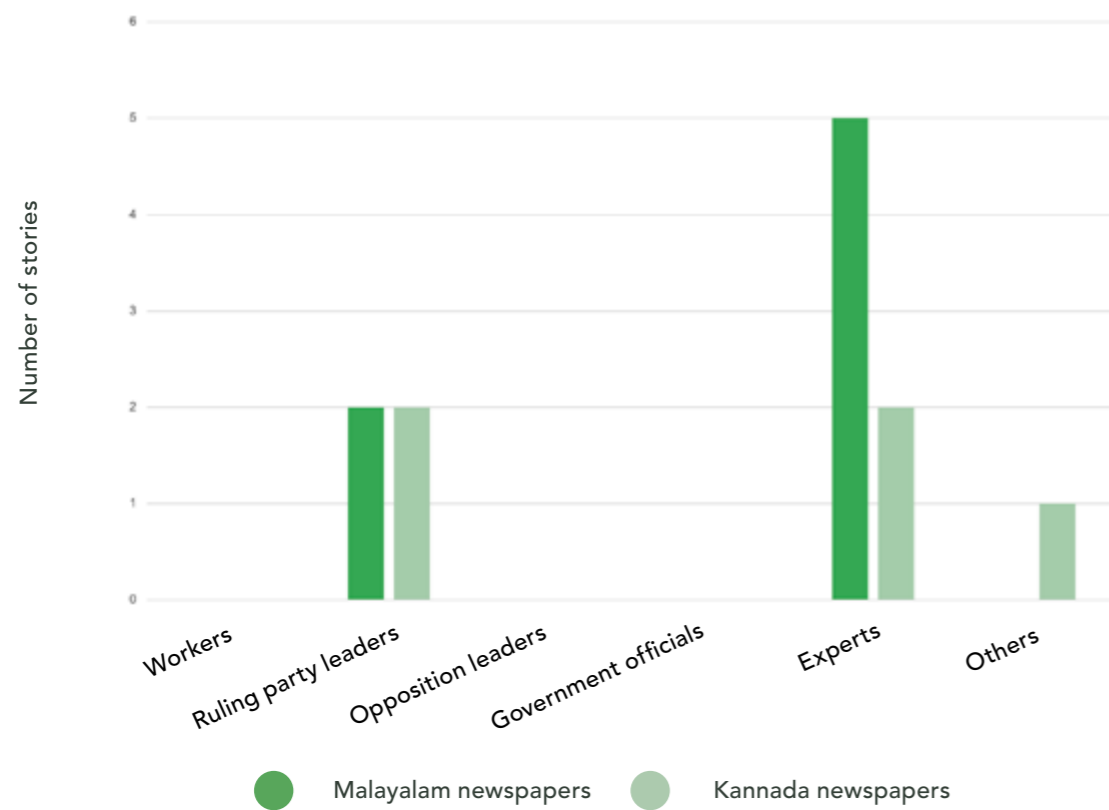
Figure 40: Mention of impact of labour reforms in newspapers

Malayalam newspapers

Kannada newspapers

Number of stories

● No   ● Yes
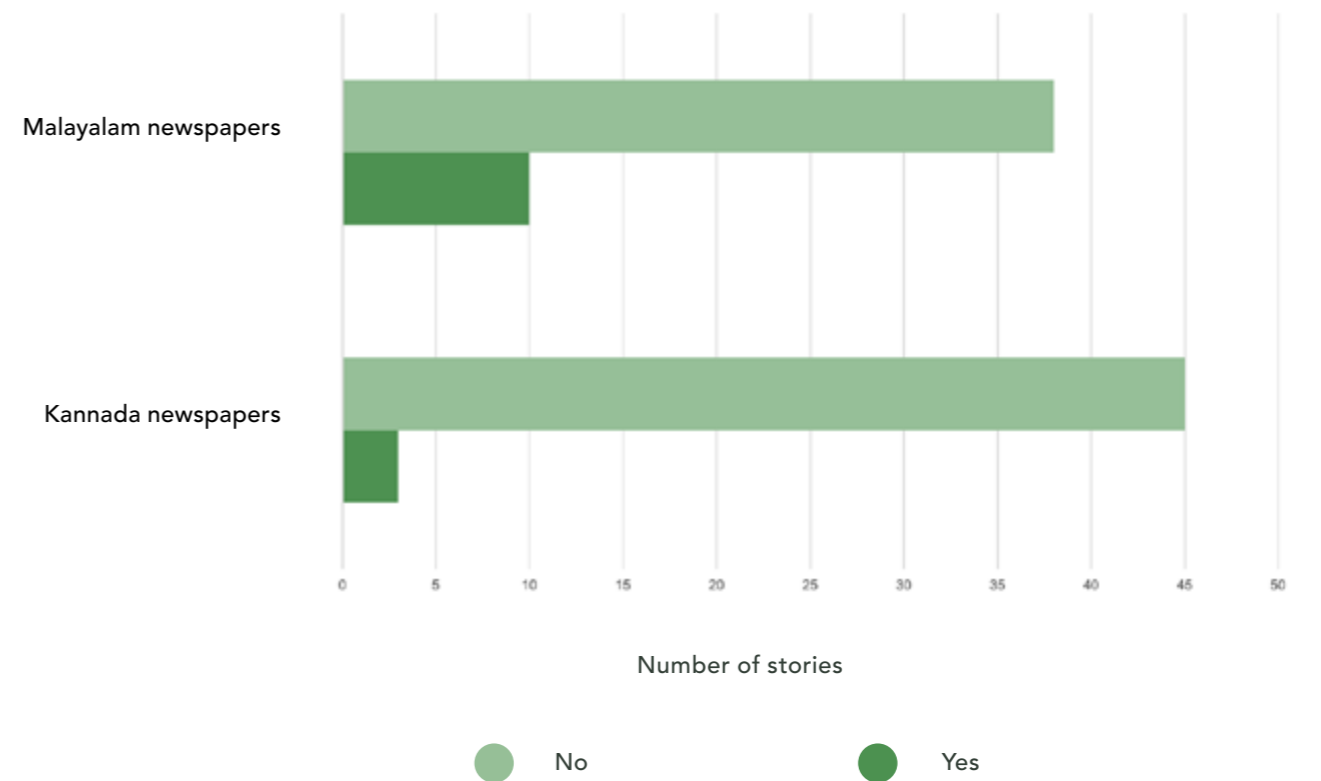
Discourse Analysis

Getting behind the numbers

While the report has discussed quantitative findings so far, the limitation of such findings are that they are to do with the frequency with which depictions of migrants and migration occurs. The significance of the findings is primarily inferred from the distribution of these occurrences. In order to investigate the media coverage of migrant workers more closely, or capture significance in other ways, we have used the method of discourse analysis. We have chosen a total of 16 media 'texts', four newspaper articles in each language and four television segments from prime time or other shows in each language. These texts are representative of our larger sample used for quantitative content analysis.

Discourse analysis analyses media texts for distinct ways in which statements are made - examining their explicit and implicit meanings, the way the statements create relations between groups, between groups and institutions, the emotional registers and rational arguments used to persuade the reader, the styles of language used to frame the issue at hand and so on. These examinations show that below the surface of the text, there are other relationships and connections at work. These relationships and connections suggest themselves to the reader in subtle ways, sometimes at odds with the explicit claims made in the coverage. Qualitative analysis consists of bringing these underlying relations to the surface, exposing the ways in which these relations and connections impose meaning and credibility to the text. Across our texts from print and television, and across both languages, we found that there were clear patterns at work in representing migrant workers and issues related to migration.

A subject in crisis

The very term 'migrant worker' fixes a particular meaning to the identity of an individual and of a group - a person who is working in a place away from home. Although there are several kinds of migrant workers (including those who work in software and have high-paying jobs), the way in which it is used implies that both media producers and audiences understand that worker refers to those who do manual work and migrant refers to the migration of this group. In reality, this grouping is not formed by equally partaking from all sections of society. Those who migrate for manual work are often from certain caste groups in particular states who have their own distinctive sets of motivations or situations that force them towards migration.

However, for the media, the persona of migrant worker was produced in an even narrower sense, i.e. a subject in crisis. In every text we analysed, we found that migrant workers are represented only in the context of a crisis and not in line with how other sections of society are covered. The crisis was mostly economic or physical in nature, and correspondingly, the media produced a discourse of migrant workers as suffering subjects, depicting them as tearful, angry, anxious and fearful. This is in line with the mainstream media's historical role from at least the late 1990s in terms of reporting on migrant workers and labour in general. The press and television news report on them only when they are in crisis (accidents, suicide, unemployment, strikes, protests and so on).

At a broader level, this is in line with the media's general strategy to invisibilise the poor, producing them only when there is an interruption to life as it is normalised for the media's primary audiences - the middle and upper classes. In other words, the 'Other' (of which migrant workers are a part) appear only as intrusions. The discussion of the crisis

determines the ways in which the subject is represented. Every aspect of the subject is thus represented only in relation to the crisis. Outside of the crisis, the subject does not enjoy an existence in the media.

Strategic and instrumental representation

Since there is no inherent existence of the migrant worker as a subject in the media, the result is that the figure of the migrant worker is then mobilised instrumentally - to discuss other topics that are always spoken about in any case as part and parcel of what we understand as news. There was a significant number of texts that reported on migrant workers in a strategic sense, as a placeholder. The substantive focus of these texts was usually on other things - in some cases, the reports were about political antagonisms between ruling party and opposition parties at the state level, or about antagonisms between state government and central government, about economic implications or calculations of a particular service (say transport), about educating the public on government schemes and measures and so on.

The instrumentalisation of migrant workers is done through various strategies. A common strategy is to begin the story with a cursory and often tokenistic reference to migrant workers. Once that primary reference is completed, the anchor or reporter shifts the discourse to address other issues which, at a fundamental level, have very little to do with migrant workers themselves. In other instances, migrant workers were instrumentally represented, by virtue of being mentioned as beneficiaries of government schemes or as part of impacted populations in national or international level studies and reports. Partly, this use of migrant workers as a discursive frame (to be used instrumentally) is still appealing to media outlets since there exists a view that media institutions have a moral obligation to hold those in power accountable, or speak on behalf of those who do not or cannot speak for themselves. Another reason for the appeal of this frame is the almost readymade emotional register

that accompanies every discussion thereby increasing the stakes involved regardless of the actual issue under discussion.

Symbolic representation and abstraction

Regardless of the instrumentalisation of workers, consistent reportage on their lives invites an intimacy about a group of people that can be deeply unsettling for media audiences who are not used to knowing about this group. An effective strategy used by the media in talking about migrant workers in general and no one in particular is to use the discourses of abstraction and symbolic representation. In none of the texts were any migrant workers referred to by their names, nor were they asked about their lives, backgrounds, histories etc. They were almost always referred to in the plural, i.e. as 'workers'. This discursive approach helps to abstract the issue at hand, not getting too close to the human suffering and struggle as well as the human dignity involved in their responses to such struggle.

The mainstream media abstracted and made symbolic use of migrant workers by often presenting them through numbers ('1200 workers will be transported in 110 buses' for example) or shown as belonging to larger and broader categories such as 'poor people' or assigned to specific state identities such as 'Biharis' or "Bengalis'. It is significant to note that in both quantitative and qualitative research carried out in this report, the caste identity of migrant workers has never been mentioned in the press, nor have gendered readings of migrant workers been mentioned.

Visually, the same effect is produced by not coming too close to the person but rather by showing the subject as a huddled group from a medium distance so that the camera is never 'too close' for discomfort. In fact, it could be argued that an economy of proximity is at work when it comes to the media's representational logic. This means that there is a correspondence between the proximity in representation and the profit motive of the media. The more a group of people are

valuable for the media as a source of income (advertising or otherwise), the more likely the media will provide a rich depiction of their inner lives. The less valuable a group of people are to the media in economic value, the more superficial their representation will be.

Seen in this way, strategies of abstraction (such as enumeration) are one way to decrease the proximity in mediation of migrant workers since these workers can generate little or no economic value for the media. A regime of individualised representation in an economy geared towards generating profits is a privilege that an audience segment has to earn for itself in today's media economy.

Exclusion through 'Othering'

Continuing with this economy of proximity, it is but natural for the media in general to organically develop a boundary. This invisible boundary defines who the media would normally cover and who are occasional visitors to the mediated world. This boundary keeping is done by the media through strategies of othering. The media, especially the Kannada print and television outlets, represented migrants as 'outsiders', distinct from local residents who were presented as 'insider' groups with authentic grievances to be highlighted. In such instances, the migrant workers were seen as undesirables causing anxiety and agitation among locals, an underlying dynamic heightened because of COVID. In many ways, visuals (images and videos) of migrant workers crowding at transport terminals or living in crowded and unhygienic living conditions were used to bring about an affective reaction, produced from a dominant caste perspective, presumably generating anxiety in readers and viewers (who are more likely to be from the dominant castes). In such coverage, migrant workers are subtly represented as carriers or vectors of disease imposed upon the local population against their will. The role of the state is minimised in these representations to heighten the supposedly direct and unmediated antagonism between the insider and the outsider.

This kind of othering is also sometimes reinforced by emphasising the linguistic identity of workers as 'Bengali' or 'Bihari'. In such representations, the shared bond of 'insiderness' is created naturally (since the coverage is done in a regional language) and thus the emphasis on the other is foregrounded.

The consequence of this othering is that the audience is led to believe that somehow, migrant workers are a necessary trouble for us, the audience of insiders. It becomes 'our' responsibility to handle 'them' even if in a compassionate and humane way. This aspect of the regional media could be especially pertinent when compared to the strategies used by national media, since othering is not available to national media in quite the same way as it is for regional media.

What is Required

From spectacle-based framing to in-depth reporting

The media in both languages and formats failed to provide any context to the crisis of daily wage migrant workers in the informal economy. None of the news stories looked at the history of migration of workers in the country, existing issues with contractors, non-payment of wages, non-availability of social security benefits, malpractices at the destination and dismal state of working and living conditions of workers that led to this crisis. It is clear that the COVID pandemic merely exposed and brought these historical and underlying contradictions and inequalities to the fore. Broadly, we find that media reportage failed to provide in-depth understanding or exploration of gaps in the system apart from occasional reports.

The study also shows lack of consistency in reporting on the issue. Migration and migrant workers remained in the news, either on the front page/prime time or on inside pages/a side story, till the time workers were walking back to their homes. There was hardly any reportage from the source or their homes; there was not enough follow up to the story. It seems that a spectacle-based framing is a strong condition for migration and migrant workers to be covered by the media. The workers were in the news till the time they could be seen walking for miles on the road with great difficulty. Gradually, as there were no dramatic visuals of workers in crisis, news too shifted to other issues. But does that mean that the issues with migrant workers also ceased to exist? As it has been seen in this study as well, structural issues on labour, labour laws and so-called labour reform received minimal reportage from the media in Karnataka and Kerala. In the very few stories that were done on the issue, the voice of the worker was completely missing. It was others on behalf of the workers who were analysing how it would impact 'the workers'.

During the second COVID wave in India, migrant workers were in crisis again because of work coming to a halt. Debt, homelessness, lack of work, caste and religious discrimination rendered workers vulnerable after the first lockdown, further exacerbated during the second lockdown. Many workers left cities once again and went back home. But because of transport being available throughout, they were not seen struggling to walk back to their homes. This does not mean that their wages were paid on time or that working conditions had improved. But we did not see any reportage on migrant workers during the second wave.

Conclusion

In this research, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to investigate the role played by regional mainstream media in the states of Kerala and Karnataka. It is useful to note that there are patterns to media representations of migration and labour which may not be easily discernible in an individual story or article. To sum up our findings across both methods, we conclude that while regional media has devoted considerable space and time to migrant workers and labourers during the first phase of the pandemic, the nature of coverage is underwhelming. Workers are often missing or represented by others speaking on their behalf. They are represented as dehistoricised subjects, produced only in and through crises.

The regional media coverage on migration and labour has resulted in some short-term relief at the regional or perhaps even at the national level. For instance, it is entirely feasible to argue that consistent pressure created by media depiction of migrant workers trying to avail public transport played a role in state governments pressurising the central government to resume trains or for politicians in home states to welcome migrant workers upon their return or provide them with some material support. In some cases, unpaid wages may have been paid due to publicity given to the problem. While the role played by media in such instances is valuable, it should be noted that the media has consistently failed to enquire into the conditions which have reproduced and increased migration dramatically over the last few decades, which have worsened working conditions, created a decline of wages due to a surplus of labour supply and reduced control by working people over their own lives. Operating within these limitations, the media has set itself up to constantly recreate this representation with every crisis.

Going forward, there is a clear need to conduct further research, especially on theorising connections between the content of such media and the ownership, audiences, advertisers and other industries associated with these media. A broader media research agenda looking into regional media dynamics would add more depth to the content analysis conducted in this study. There is also a need to scale up such studies through comparative analysis between different states and languages, between large and small media, between different modes of distribution, different kinds of audiences and so on. There is also a need to correlate the intertextual linkages between regional media discourses and social media discourses to understand the complex ways that they act upon each other on a range of issues. We hope that this research study, through its theoretical and methodological resources, will be a small step towards developing further research on such topics.

Appendix

Code Sheet

Note: This code sheet is for television and newspapers
* indicates that more than one choice can be selected

In each column, fill 0 for 'No' or 'not applicable' and 1 for 'Yes' or 'applicable'.

Prominence

1. Duration of segment on workers/labour reforms

- Less than a minute
- Between 1-3 minutes
- Between 3-5 minutes
- More than 5 minutes

(For newspapers)
1. Length of segment on workers/labour reforms

- Less than a column
- Between 2-3 columns
- Between 4-5 columns
- More than 5 columns

2. Placement of story on prime time*

- Top story
- Between 2nd and 4th story
- After 4th story

(For newspapers)
2. Placement of story on front page*

- Top story
- Side column in first half of the page
- Second half of the page

3. Voice on prime time*/ on front page (for newspapers)

- Workers speaking
- Others speaking on workers

4. Duration of voice for workers speaking

- Less than a minute
- Between 1-3 minutes
- Between 3-5 minutes
- More than 5 minutes

(For newspapers)
4. Length of voice for workers speaking

- Single quote
- Between 2-3 quotes
- Between 4-5 quotes
- More than 5 quotes

5. Duration of others speaking on workers

- Less than a minute
- Between 1-3 minutes
- Between 3-5 minutes
- More than 5 minutes

(For newspapers)
5. Representation to others speaking on workers

- Single quote
- Between 2-3 quotes
- Between 4-5 quotes
- More than 5 quotes

6. Is the story about workers inside the state?

Workers' Representation

7. Gender*

- Male
- Female

8. Caste mentioned/shown?

9. Religion mentioned/shown?

10. Occupation mentioned/shown?

11. At what stage is the worker represented?*

- Source state
- Destination state
- On the road

12. Who is speaking for workers?*

- Ruling party political leader/minister
- Opposition party political leader
- Government officials and administrators
- Experts (e.g. activists, NGOs, academicians, doctors, unions, lawyers)
- Anchor/reporter
- Celebrities
- Others (e.g. members of public)

Nature of coverage/representation

Context

13. When did immigration start?

14. Is sector-wise occupation mentioned?

15. Distinction between organised and unorganised sector?

16. Discussion of present labour laws and structural conditions?

17. Social issues mentioned/shown?*

- Working conditions
- Living conditions
- Difficulties with walking
- Scarcity of food and water
- Lack of information
- Lack of transport
- Social discrimination
- Others (mention briefly)

18. Economic issues mentioned/shown?*

- Non-payment of wages
- Low wages
- Unemployment
- Remittances
- Lack of cash for expenses (such as transport, food, rent etc.)

19. Where are workers shown?*

- Home
- Work
- Road
- Transport (on train/truck/bus/private vehicle)
- Others (mention briefly)

Are workers represented as: (0 = No, 1 = Yes)*

20. Happy

21. Sad

22. Self-sufficient

23. In need of aid

24. Calm

25. Angry

26. Courageous/Brave

27. Scared/Fearful/Anxious

28. Irresponsible

29. Responsible

30. Knowledgeable

31. Ignorant

Tone of the show

32. Words used to describe workers fit into*

- Survivors
- Victims
- Rebels
- Ignorant
- Others

Role of the Government

33. Were government schemes and measures mentioned/shown?

34. Were discrepancies in government and administrative measures mentioned/shown?

35. Were challenges in implementing government and administrative measures mentioned/shown?

Labour Reforms

36. Did the programme/article show/mention labour reforms?

37. Were gaps in labour reforms mentioned/shown?

38. Who is speaking about labour reforms?*

- Workers
- Ruling party leaders
- Opposition party leaders
- Government officials and administrators
- Experts (e.g. activists, NGOs, academicians, unions, lawyers)
- Anchor/reporter
- Others

39. Was the impact of labour reforms mentioned/shown?

40. Is there an image with the article on the front page? (only for newspaper sheet)

"For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom... for reclamation of human personality."

Dr. B. R. AMBEDKAR

Media Under the Lens
Representation of *migrant workers* in regional media during the COVID crisis

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