

# ENSURING DECENT WORK AND DIGNITY

A review of engagement with  
domestic workers across seven States of India

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Centre for Integrated Development (CID)  
Institute of Social Research & Development (ISRD)  
Mahila Action (MA)  
Montfort Social Institute (MSI)  
Rural Literacy & Health Programme (RLHP)  
The Calcutta Samaritans (TCS)

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Karnataka Regional Office  
Madhya Pradesh Regional Office  
Odisha Regional Office  
Rajasthan & Gujarat Regional Office  
West Bengal Regional Office

The intervention with domestic workers was done as part of the European Commission supported project: "Securing rights and sustainable livelihoods through collective action and education for people dependent on the informal economy in India."

First published in 2019

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Cover Photograph: Ram Kumar

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Printed at: 3P Solutions, B 186 Okhla Phase I, New Delhi 110020

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# Foreword

Globally, over 40 million people are engaged in domestic work and approximately 5 million are in India. The majority of domestic workers are women, and the sector also sees the employment of large numbers of children.

Rural distress is forcing people to migrate to cities, and domestic work has emerged as one of the largest sectors within the informal economy. Along with the travails of distress migration, trafficking, unscrupulous middlemen and unregulated placement agencies increase the vulnerability of people entering this sector. The wide prevalence of child labour, risk of sexual harassment and physical abuse, absence of minimum wages, lack of holidays, non-specified working hours, especially for live-in workers and no job security are issues faced by domestic workers.

India is signatory to the International Labour Organisation's Domestic Workers Convention which lays down that the rights of domestic workers, including State ensured social security and maternity benefit, should be as applicable to all workers. However as a country we have not honoured our commitment by making positive legal reform and ensuring effective implementation.

With the support of the European Commission, ActionAid Association had in 2015 undertaken a project to work on "Securing rights and sustainable livelihoods through collective action and education for people dependent on the informal economy in India." As part of this project ActionAid Association has intervened with domestic workers in 16 cities across seven States - Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Telangana and West Bengal.

We are proud of the association with Antakshari Foundation (AF), Centre for Child & Women Development (CCWD), Centre for Integrated Development (CID), Institute of Social Research & Development (ISRD), Mahila Action (MA), Montfort Social Institute (MSI), Rural Literacy & Health Programme (RLHP) and The Calcutta Samaritans, our partners and allies who have collaborated with us on this project. We are grateful to colleagues in the Citizen Rights Collective (CiRiC), the urban knowledge activist hub hosted by ActionAid Association and

our Regional Offices looking after our work in Andhra Pradesh & Telangana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan & Gujarat and West Bengal. Together we have engaged with domestic workers, raising awareness on rights and entitlements, and issues of social justice. We have built collectives, engaged in skill enhancement and have worked with them to bring dignity and value to their contributions to society and ensuring their social security.

More than 8000 numbers of domestic workers have been organised in these 6 states. Today the impact of the intervention is visible as the collectives of domestic workers organise themselves and register themselves as unions to work towards claiming their right and dignity. The collectives with confidence approach government offices and raise their concerns to access their due share.

Nearing the end of the project we initiated a review of our work. The process started with a national workshop held in July 2018 in Bengaluru, which saw the participation of all partners and allies, where we reflected on our collective and individual journeys. We are grateful that the process was joined by two external reviewers – Geeta Menon and Madhu Bhushan, both of whom are seasoned activists and senior leaders engaged with social issues and women's issues in particular. The external reviewers analysed the processes and outcomes of the project through direct field observations. They conducted field visits in Hyderabad, Jaipur, Mysore, Indore, Bhopal and Jabalpur to understand the way in which ground actions contributed to the national processes of mobilising domestic workers to claim their workers' rights.

This publication is based on their report. We hope to integrate the findings and recommendations of this report in building our future strategies of intervention with the domestic worker sector. We look forward to any comments and suggestions.

In solidarity,  
**Sandeep Chachra**  
*Executive Director*

# Introduction

This publication is based on the report that emerged from a review and reflection process on the work with domestic workers that ActionAid Association had initiated in 2015 with the support of European Commission under the project to secure rights and sustainable livelihoods through collective action and education for people dependent on the informal economy in India. The project is named: "Securing rights and sustainable livelihoods through collective action and education for people dependent on the informal economy in India." And is referred to in short as the EC-PIE project. The engagement with domestic workers extended to seven states, namely Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Telangana and West Bengal, and in 16 cities namely Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Cuttack, Guntur, Gwalior, Hyderabad, Indore, Jabalpur, Jaipur, Kolkata, Mysore, Nalgonda, Suryapet, Vishakhapatnam, Vizayanagaram and Wanaparthy. The organisations that partnered in this project included: Antakshari Foundation (AF), Centre for Child & Women Development (CCWD), Centre for Integrated Development (CID), Institute of Social Research & Development (ISRDI), Mahila Action (MA), Montfort Social Institute (MSI), Rural Literacy & Health Programme (RLHP) and The Calcutta Samaritans. As part of the project, more than 8,000 domestic workers have been mobilised through different community-based organisations in the seven states.

The overall framework for the project was built on ActionAid Association's work of over a decade with people dependent on the informal economy (PIE) in India. The overall objective aimed to build the capacity of PIEs to advocate for and obtain social security and better working conditions while strengthening their livelihoods through skills building and vocational training. The rationale was that safeguarding social security for the most marginalised PIEs as well as minimum wages and better work conditions will help provide a life of dignity. Enhancing skills would provide PIEs the opportunity to seek better and higher paying work thus contributing to strengthen livelihoods and a better quality of life.

The review and reflection process was initiated by Citizen's Rights Collective (CiRiC), a policy-advocacy hub hosted by ActionAid Association, which focuses on urban issues from the viewpoint of common citizens. The object was to reflect



and review the work done so far to understand how far this journey has gone and how effective it has been, to celebrate and document the achievements even while analysing and learning from the challenges faced towards articulating sustainable strategies.

As part of this process, the reviewers, Geeta Menon and Madhu Bhushan, visited eight cities, namely Jabalpur, Indore, Bhopal, Vishakhapatnam, Jaipur, Hyderabad, Nalgonda and Mysore to interact with seven organisations, namely Montfort Social Institute (MSI), Rural Literacy and Health Programme (RLHP), Antakshari Foundation (AF), Centre for Child & Women Development (CCWD), Centre for Integrated Development (CID), Institute of Social Research & Development (ISRD) and Mahila Action (MA). The reviewers also met the organisations set up by domestic workers.

This review has primarily been a result of focus group discussions, interviews and interactions with domestic workers, union representatives, employers, labour department officials, field activists and organisational heads. The reviewers have drawn upon earlier work reports as also their insights and analysis to present a reflection-review that will surely add value to this journey of seeking rights and dignity for domestic workers.

This introduction is followed by a chapter that sets the political, economic and socio-cultural context to domestic work in India. It is followed by three chapters providing detailed narratives on the intervention in the cities of Jaipur, Hyderabad and Mysore. These are based on the visits of the reviewers to these cities. While some common threads have been picked out in all the three narratives where it comes to the shared outcomes sought from the project, there is specific attention paid to the unique strength of each of these interventions that would help in understanding the perspective and history within which it is located and enable readers to draw lessons regarding issues connected with the domestic work sector. This is followed by a chapter examining the intervention as a whole. Lastly we have the chapter presenting conclusions and recommendations.

Gratitude needs to be expressed to all the inspiring domestic workers who keep their spirits high against all odds and those community mobilisers and organisational representatives who shared their time and work so generously. It is all their collective voices and insights that inform and constitute much of this review and reflection.

## Chapter I

# The political, Economic and Socio-cultural Context to Domestic Work

### 1.1 The Political Economy of Unorganised Labour

The Indian Economy is characterised by the existence of a vast majority of informal or unorganised labour employment. As per the Economic Survey 2007-08, 93 per cent of India's workforce includes the self-employed and those employed in unorganised sector, which contributes to fifty per cent of the country's GDP. The Ministry of Labour, Government of India, has categorised the unorganised labour force under four groups in terms of occupation, nature of employment, especially distressed categories and service categories.

- » **Terms of Occupation:** Small and marginal farmers, landless agricultural labourers, share croppers, fishermen, those engaged in animal husbandry, beedi rolling, labelling and packing, building and construction workers, leather workers, weavers, artisans, salt workers, workers in brick kilns and stone quarries, workers in saw mills, oil mills, etc. come under this category.
- » **Terms of Nature of Employment:** Attached agricultural labourers, bonded labourers, migrant workers, contract and casual labourers come under this category.
- » **Terms of Especially Distressed Category:** Toddy tappers, scavengers, carriers of head loads, drivers of animal-driven vehicles, loaders and unloaders come under this category.

» **Terms of Service Category:** Midwives, domestic workers, fishermen and women, barbers, vegetable and fruit vendors, newspaper vendors, etc. belong to this category.

In addition to these four categories, there exists a large section of unorganised labour force such as cobblers, Hamals, handicraft artisans, handloom weavers, lady tailors, physically handicapped self-employed persons, rickshaw-pullers, auto drivers, sericulture workers, carpenters, tannery workers, power-loom workers and urban poor.

Though the availability of statistical information on intensity and accuracy varies significantly, the extent of unorganised workers is significantly high among agricultural workers, building and other construction workers and home based workers. According to the Economic Survey 2007-08, agricultural workers constitute the largest segment in the unorganised sector, i.e., 52 per cent of the total workers.

As per the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), 30 million workers in India are constantly on the move (migrant labour) and 25.94 million women workforce has been added in the labour market from the year 2000 onwards. The tragedy is that the existing social security legislations cover only 8 per cent of the total work force of 459 million in India.

These NSSO reports also clearly establish that the labour market of India has been undergoing tremendous transformations, including growth of informal sector activities, deterioration in the quality of employment (in terms of job security, terms and conditions at work), weakening of worker organisations and collective bargaining institutions, marked decline in social security, etc. To a great extent, these transformations could be related to the ongoing globalisation process and the resultant efforts on the part of employers to minimise the cost of production to the lowest levels. It is also evident that most of these outcomes are highly correlated and mutually reinforcing. A closer analysis suggests that the growing informalisation of labour market has been central to most of these transformations, which inter alia highlights the utility

of understanding the growth of unorganised sector in India and its implications.<sup>1</sup>

Developing economies such as India therefore have to be seen in the context of a rapidly changing economic and occupational structure, leading to a shift away from agriculture, the growth of an organised segment in manufacturing and services and the requirement of paid work with certain characteristics within it. These characteristics of employed workers are also currently being influenced by the pattern of global production and competition, which is encouraging outsourcing and vertical and horizontal production networks. This national and global dynamics interact with historically situated Indian policies, and labour and other institutions, which are now rapidly changing to allow for faster responses to market conditions through greater flexibility in labour markets. The general outcome of all this is a trend towards greater homework (with distinct gendered features) and informalisation of employment (even among regular wage/salaried workers).

In our "global" cities that are being show-cased as the new faces of an affluent and vibrant India, there are lakhs of people who rely on manual labour for their own livelihood. Their incomes have not grown at the staggering rate of their employers; indeed adjusted for inflation their incomes have often fallen over the last two and half decades, driving them into deeper poverty. Inflation redistributes income from wage earners to fixed income groups to profit recipients. The impact of inflation is directly dependent on whether one earns a fixed wage or a salary, or if one earns a variable income. As inflation erodes the domestic workers' and unorganised workers' purchasing power, there is no increment in their wages. They are likely to be more impoverished. The situation is further exacerbated by the absence of any social security benefit that could provide a safety net.

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1. Vikaspedia-Unorganised Labour force in India Working and living conditions of workers in the Unorganised Sector----A Review of Literature.....[www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net)



Lack of skill and education, few new openings in the organised sector, lack of awareness of legal rights, deficient work quality and ambiguous terms of service draw the labour into the available vortex of the unorganised sector.

At another level while trying to understand the changes in our political economy brought in with our country's adherence to debt and the Structural Adjustment Programme from the nineties, what must also be taken into account is a simultaneous rise in fundamentalism and communalisation of society that has totally disrupted social functioning at all levels.

## **1.2 Major Characteristics of the Unorganised Sector**

The term "unorganised sector" has been defined by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS), Government of India as the sector that "consists of all unincorporated private enterprises owned by individuals or households engaged in the sale or production of goods and services operated on a proprietary or partnership basis and with less than ten total workers".<sup>2</sup> Easy entrance, local operations, ambiguous legal standing, ready requirement of labour, education and skill deficit, no fixed regulations of working hours or payment, poor rate of reparation, ignorance regarding and lack of possible government intervention and help characterise this sector.

The sector is also plagued by seasonal employment in agricultural sector, contractual work, no social security and welfare legislations and no rights and minimum wages. Here they face problems like poor health conditions, substandard working life, harassment at work, inadequate and unequal wage structure, long working hours, poor housing facilities, lack of safety measures, atrocities on women workers and no proper education for children of workers.

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2. Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector. Academic Foundation, 1 Jan 2008, p.1774

Domestic helps, construction labour (migrant or otherwise), drivers, masons, carpenters, street vendors, incense sticks as well as beedi makers and several others are a part of this informal sector. Workers of the unorganised sector have lower job security, a poorer chance of growth and no leaves and paid holidays; they have lower protection against employers indulging in unfair or illegal practices.

The workplace is scattered and fragmented with absence of formal employer – employee relationships.

In rural areas, the unorganised labour force is highly stratified on caste and community considerations. While such considerations are much less in urban areas, it cannot be said that they are altogether absent as the bulk of unorganised workers in urban areas are basically migrant workers from rural areas. Workers in the unorganised sector are usually subjected to indebtedness and bondage, as their meagre income cannot meet their livelihood needs. The unorganised workers do not receive sufficient attention from the trade unions or from the government whose intervention is essential for taking necessary steps at the legal and policy level to improve their working and living conditions.

### **1.3 Inadequate and Ineffective Legal Landscape**

In the specific case of contract labourers in the organised sector, though laws are being liberalised but there is lack of implementation of the law. In any case, the law does not provide for similar wages and working conditions to contract workers. Hence the outcome for these workers falls short on every count. More significantly, these workers do not have recourse to the formal industrial relations machinery and employers make every effort to deny them any collective or individual recourse and to seek redressal of grievances. This situation has led to explosive industrial conflicts in recent years. Further, as studies show, the impact of hiring of a segment of flexible contract workers also spills on to the regular segment of the workforce, in general, reducing their ability to organise and bargain. This has generally affected workers' freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, and for contract workers, it has led to persistent discrimination at the workplace.

There have been major recommendations in the past calling for simplification of labour laws, comprehensive and effective regulation of conditions of work, minimum conditions of work in the informal sector, and the introduction of higher levels of social security and termination benefits, along with greater flexibility in hiring and firing for employers.<sup>3</sup> But the reforms that are currently being considered by states and the federal government instead aim at greater labour flexibility with very little attention paid either to introducing minimum conditions of work, or to introduce effective regulation of prescribed conditions laid down by existing law. Furthermore, the proposed reforms are not based on wide ranging and in-depth tri-partite consultations through well-established mechanisms such as the Indian Labour Conference, which are required given the wide ranging nature of the changes that are being contemplated.

While on the one hand, these changes could aggravate the existing imbalance in industrial relations, on the other, the increased informality and high turnover of workers could overturn the advantage that is hoped to be gained from higher labour flexibility.

Labour policy in India should aim to reduce the chasm between under-regulated and over-regulated sectors, by making minimum conditions of work applicable to all workers, simplifying and modifying labour laws that are applicable to the formal sector, with the objective of introducing an optimum degree of flexi-security, making regulation of conditions of work more effective, and making the machinery for implementation of industrial relations and labour laws efficient, speedy and more accessible to workers. Tri-partism should continue to be the bedrock of labour policy and labour law reform. The Contract Labour (Regulation and abolition) Act, 1970 obfuscates the relationship between the worker and firm/establishment and the Act should be comprehensively reviewed and its scope restricted. The employer-employee relationship should be clearly defined, covered by a formal contract, and wherever possible, linked to a

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3. NCEUS, 2009b; NCL 2002



universal social security card, which would combine the smart card, as envisaged to be introduced for unorganised sector workers.

## 1.4 The Domestic Work Sector

It is in this context that we need to also understand the specific impact on the domestic work sector. From the days of bonded labour, of the feudal Jajmani system, to the modern capitalist wage system, from the days of slavery, where no wages were paid, but payment was in kind, to the modern slavery of the wage system, the domestic work sector has evolved. But whether the situation of the domestic workers of today, who are now placed in the urban and district towns is any better than their sisters of yesteryears, is highly debatable. For it is clear that one of the primary and most prevalent group in the informal sector that has been largely ignored, and where slave-like working conditions prevail, is domestic work. The hidden nature of their work, their low social position and their marginalisation in society and law, are together major impediments to the enjoyment of basic human rights by domestic workers. Due to lack of protection by labour laws, domestic workers are denied basic rights: the right to fair wages and humane working conditions, the right to due process and to fair and just trial, the right to be protected against inhuman and degrading treatment and unusual punishment, the right to be heard and air grievances, the right to complain without the threat of physical or verbal abuse or withholding of salary and the right to recreation and social security. Domestic workers are generally looked down upon by law-enforcers when they try to complain about maltreatment by their employers. They lack access to counselling and legal and social services.

The fact that migration from rural areas to towns, from remote villages to cities is happening in unstoppable proportions complicates the issue. Migration continues to be inevitable, but there is the issue of unsafe migration "wherein lakhs of women and girls are vulnerable to trafficking, especially to trafficking for sexual slavery, forced labour trafficking and servitude." Thousands of girls all over the country fall prey to traffickers and fly-by-night placement agencies who exploit those young women who come to towns and cities in search of livelihood. Many of them



are placed as “live-in” maids in urban upper middle class and elite households. They work long hours, with no rest or free time, suffer from all kinds of indignities and violence including sexual harassment, are not given their salary and face severe isolation and consequent ill health.

It is this combined site of living and working, which creates a surface of much ambiguity in relationships between worker and employer. A site which is defined as a “family”, when family relationships are the least prone to regularisation.

## **1.5 Intersectionality of Patriarchy, Caste and Class in Domestic Work**

Patriarchy hands over control of women's mobility, economic resources, productive and reproductive power to men. Both biological and social reproduction is carried out by women in most societies. The fact that the domestic work sector is dominated by women reflects the gendered notion of housework in our society. Where unpaid work and household work is devalued, the women going out to do the same tasks in somebody else's house are considered low, and their work is not recognised. It is in this context that the convention call, Domestic Work is Decent work, (The ILO Convention, C189, 2011) achieves great significance. It helps to change mindsets and nomenclature from “servant” to worker. It also raises self-assertion of women, as well as creates an identity for legislative framework.

The vulnerability and devaluation of domestic workers is compounded by the gendered nature of domestic work. The female domestic worker who enters a household to work becomes the lowest member of the family hierarchy, subject to the command of not just a single employer but a household of employers, including male and female, young and old. In most cases, the domestic worker is the lone worker in a household of employers. This isolation greatly exacerbates her vulnerability, particularly if all her means of communication with the outside world, by phone, post or interaction, are cut off.

Women employers are not necessarily allies of the female domestic worker. Class-privileged women have freed themselves from reproductive labour by hiring lower-class women, resulting in a two-tier hierarchy among women, as well as the preservation of traditional patriarchy. Therefore, although domestic work tends to be gendered, this does not usually lead to the solidarity of women across class lines. On the contrary, there are profound conflicts of interest between women employers and women domestic workers. In many recorded cases of abuse, physical violence against domestic workers has been perpetrated by women employers. Relate this to women employers' demonisation of sexually abused workers for "seducing" the men in the household, thereby allowing the men to escape blame, even when they are the ones inflicting sexual harassment, assault, abuse or rape on the domestic workers.

Women domestic workers are thus at the bottom not only within the family hierarchy but also a class-differentiated gender hierarchy. It has been suggested that there seems to be some correlation between the status of women in general in a particular society and the treatment of domestic workers, such that the lower the status of women is in a society, the worse is the treatment meted out to women domestic workers as the lowest of the low.

Such vulnerability is compounded by age, caste, ethnicity and citizenship. A key problem with paid domestic work is its historical continuity with the unpaid reproductive labour of either wives, mothers and daughters or slaves, serfs and debts-bondswomen. They, especially the part time and full day workers live in their own homes and go as regular workers to their workplace, which is the employer's house.

Since housework or domestic work can also be seen as an extension of the caste system in India, most workers are poorly paid, underpaid and discriminated against. Therefore, domestic workers remain victims of unmitigated injustice, and are totally powerless and voiceless. They are treated as objects and non-persons, which is a modern-day manifestation of slavery.



## Chapter II

# **The Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union - A Case Study in Collectivisation and Unionisation**

The Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union (registered in 2008) is embedded in the activist history of the two people who have initiated it, i.e. Harkesh Bugalia and Mewa Bharti. The fact that the two of them are rooted in the politics and culture of Rajasthan has further enabled the union to evolve a holistic perspective that not only shapes their programmes and initiatives but also the sensibilities of the domestic workers as also the community coordinators and activists. In the context of the EC-PIE project review -reflection it would therefore be worthwhile to track and capture some milestones in this rather remarkable journey of collectivisation and unionisation while contextualising it in the cultural history and political perspective that inform the process. A perspective that is also uniquely feminist in the way that it has brought women workers together around issues and a praxis that are simultaneously personal and political, – i.e. issues of selfhood, dignity, equality and freedom from violence both in the home and in the work place. The challenge for the union will be to ensure its autonomy and sustainability even while attempting to institutionalise some of their work as they have tried to do through the EC-PIE project and to build those support structures that would continue to strengthen and sustain their membership who are aware of themselves as women as much as workers.



## **2.1 Context: Between Ghettoisation and Globalisation**

Jaipur is a city that is dominated by traditional occupations including trading and business and is not a “service class” city that normally needs domestic workers only because both the husband and the wife go to work. Here the “Sethani” stays at home and therefore having a domestic worker is more a status symbol than an actual need. This by and large is infact a defining feature of the relationship between the domestic worker and her employer. 90 per cent of domestic workers come from the Dalit and Muslim communities, mostly comprising Bengali speaking migrants from Cooch Behar. Those from Rajasthan are not even willing to own up to being domestic workers since locally it is considered to be a demeaning occupation. However, unlike the Rajasthani domestic workers the migrant labourers from Bihar and Cooch Behar don't hide their identities as domestic workers. In fact they acknowledge it openly since it is also their source of security especially vis-a-vis the police. The nomadic communities don't do domestic work at all.

The migrants are viewed with great suspicion despite the fact that there is a historical relationship between Cooch Behar and Rajasthan. Maharani Gayatri Devi, the third Maharani consort of Jaipur from 1940 to 1949, through her marriage to Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II who was the last ruling Maharaja of the Jaipur state, was originally from Cooch Behar in West Bengal. There are many Marwari families from Rajasthan who have also gone and settled in turn in Cooch Behar. To avoid being called Bangladeshi especially if they are Muslim, they often hide their real names and identify themselves as Banglabhashis. They are alienated by language and culture, unskilled, deprived of official identity and access to basic civic amenities. Moreover, the threat of being dubbed Bangladeshis and therefore potential terrorists hovers over them constantly.

The context for domestic work in and around cities like Jaipur is a society, that in some sense, is a post communal one in which the ghettoisation and invisibilisation of the Muslim minority is apparently complete. The scenario is further complicated by the fact that Muslim minority continues to be deeply stratified by caste which in these times

of globalisation is now complicated by class. This becomes even more visible within a home which is a work place where identities of gender, caste, class, religion and community intersect and impact on each other in deeply intimate and intricate ways.

Most of the migrants from Bengal are Muslims. There is not too much visible tension between the women of the migrant and local communities on the ground. But suspicions run deep on the part of the state like the police. For instance the moment they see that one of the workers is from Bengal or from Cooch Behar, the immediate suspicion is that she is a Bangladeshi. However since we have our own credibility as locals and our organisation is also well known, we use this tactic that we use to diffuse any tensions that arise by saying “so what if they are not from Rajasthan. They are citizens of this country”. One thing we have told our women is that we are clearly living not in a BJP or Congress raj but in the Raj of the Constitution or the law and we are citizens of this country. And this is the basis on which they argue with the police too. But yes the situation is deteriorating, especially with the controversy over the NRC in Assam and Bengal over the last couple of years and the impact is being felt by our Muslim women workers. And despite our best efforts to deal with it and diffuse it, the psychological pressure is there. As for instance Raheema, who was one of our strongest and most articulate member, has become quieter. Muslim women end up wearing a bindi to work or change their name into a more Hindu one. In one of the areas which is Muslim dominated they keep getting called constantly to the police station for verification, which they are now beginning to resist. But the fact is that in big towns like Jaipur this is less noticeable since people do not carry their identities as a mark on their heads. And so the tension between a Rajasthani and a non Rajasthani is not that bad – at least not as bad as in Mumbai.

– Harkesh Bugalia  
Rajasthan Kachi Busthi Mahasangh

It is important to see and understand how the workers empowered by their collective and union transcend or even use their specific locations to negotiate for more fluid identities and spaces even while they achieve better working conditions through more effective collective and individual bargaining power.

Minority women don't get jobs easily. That is also because they live in poorer areas that are not close to upper middle class colonies. I know of three women who have changed their names only so that they can get a job. There is an urgent need for the union to take up sustained counselling or initiate dialogues between owners and domestic workers from the minority community. One of the main stated reasons for why Muslims are not taken for work is because they eat non vegetarian food. But this is used as an excuse.

In an incident last week, a fight broke out between a Hindu and a Muslim woman. The latter had changed her name and gone for work. So the Hindu woman had sarcastically said that some people here are changing their "naam" to do "kaam". On hearing this the Muslim woman went to fight with her saying, "If I need to change my "naam" to do "kaam", I will. After all I have children to feed!" She further challenged her saying "you come with me and I will tell my name and let me see if you can get me a job! Anyway I am only changing my name and not my religion." This made the Hindu woman think and look at her with more sympathy.

In another case that happened quite some time back in 2012 when we had just started the union, a Muslim woman who lived in an area where 150 domestic workers stayed was thrown out of her job. She had gone to work under a Hindu name. Once when she accidentally cut her hand while working with a knife, she exclaimed "Allah" without realising what she had said. The employer was shocked and then started shouting at her saying that "you are a Muslim" and dismissed her. All the other women went to the employer and told her "so what if she is a Muslim? The blood that flows through her is



the same as that flows through ours. We all know her very well. You must take her back to work otherwise we will see that nobody will come and work in your house.” The threat worked and the woman, whose name is Jameela continues to work in the house.

**– Shah Dutt**  
**Rajasthan Kachi Basti Mahasangh**

Although we know that many of the Muslims face problems in getting a job or run into difficulties with their employer, nobody had come to us with a complaint or a plea that they wanted our support. But the women do talk amongst themselves and they have worked out their strategies to deal with such situations like changing their name or wearing a tikka on their forehead. But they do ask, “if a Hindu can work in a Muslim house why can’t Muslims work in a Hindu house?” There are some employers who could be Hindu or even Jain who are open and they keep Muslim domestic workers. But we have not gone directly to any employers to counsel them on this issue.

**– Meena Sarma**  
**Community Coordinator, RMKU**

The broad sweep of economic changes that have been taking place post globalisation have been the cause for huge changes taking place in the lives of domestic workers impacting on their unionising. As for instance the mushrooming of new gated communities and large flats into which domestic workers cannot enter unless they have appropriate ID cards. The employers and domestic workers are not directly linked and they do not know each other personally since it is the placement agency that mediates between the two. The agency too acts largely on behalf of the employers and not for domestic workers. All those who work in such gated communities are by and large locals from Rajasthan who don't normally come to the union for that would mean disclosing their occupation. Payments too are made by cash through the cards. There



are lots of sexual harassment cases that happen here but none of them come out because they don't interact with the union.

The impact of these economic changes that is leading to increased migration and decreasing work opportunities is also being felt on the home lives of domestic workers where violence is also escalating. On account of NREGA, migration had come down about 10 years ago. This had a positive impact on women workers since they got jobs in villages and were able to earn more. Now that NREGA has been rendered ineffective, migration has once again escalated. And while the lack of work is hitting the entire labouring class, it is on women that the impact is the most. The stress is to earn more in a context where jobs are dwindling and to put up with violence and exploitation both within the house and outside. She has to get up early in the morning at 5' o clock, has to do her house work, put up with her husband's abuse and violence and then go the workplace that has its own tensions and problems. She barely gets to relax for even an hour in the afternoons or evenings. The man is not fulfilling his role and the woman has to shoulder the entire responsibility as a result of which she is facing enormous economic and psychological stress.

This then is the broader context within which RMKU is attempting to organise the domestic workers vis-a-vis their rights with the government and employers and also to strengthen their own internal collective processes to empower and support each other.

## **2.2 The People, their Politics and the Process**

Harkesh Bugalia has a long history of being in the student and subsequently trade union movement since the mid-eighties. He was in the student organisation AISA from 1986 to 1990 and was involved with the peasant movement too. He started work with the urban poor in 1994 and formed a union that was predominantly Bengali since most of the workers were migrants. The focus was on rehabilitating them through regularising the slum. He also worked with nomadic communities in 1998 and helped to rehabilitate about 2,250 families.

In 1996, he formed Rajasthan's first construction workers' union, i.e. the Rajasthan Nirmaan Mazdoor Sanghathan which is now called Rajasthan Evam General Mazdoor Union. They are now also collaborating with 45 organisations from across the state called Dalit Alpasankhyat Daman Prathirodh Manch of the Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan. It is clear that the Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union has its genesis in a vibrant trade union movement that has fought for the rights to livelihood and dignity of all marginalised groups, particularly the urban poor, labour and constructions workers. They are also connected with an International Shramik Solidarity Group that predates the Worker's Charter that the EC-PIE project has initiated. As Harkesh says "while our feet should be rooted in the local, our thoughts/soch should be global."

The EC-PIE project has helped to strengthen and stabilise some dimensions of their ongoing work that is obviously not project but process based with a larger political vision of empowering labourers while transforming labour relationships.

"This is the first time we are taking funding and we are learning a lot as part of this process. I did not understand anything about project maintenance for a whole year. But now it has helped us to collectivise and stabilise our ongoing work with the domestic workers as also initiate work in new areas like starting the workers facilitation centres and the Kachi Basti Mahasangh. Our work has sustained not because it is project based but is invested in our slogan 'power in people' and is ongoing in that direction."

**– Harkesh Bugalia**

Mewa Bharathi who is the moving force behind the Rajasthan Mahila Kamgar Union comes from Jhunjhunu district where literacy levels are very high. She got married when she was in the 12th standard to Harkeshji and then came to Jaipur. Her personal story of politicisation and empowerment is deeply interwoven with the empowerment of the communities she has been organising and working with including the domestic workers. Her coming out from her house and getting drawn

into women's and human rights activism through well-known activists in Jaipur, her gradual involvement with issues related to labour and in particular domestic workers through the feminist organisation, Jagori, addressing issues of sexual violence, domestic violence and discrimination based on caste and class - all led to laying the base for the union through the collectives that were being slowly formed. The story is best told in her own words in which she speaks of dealing with rape and sexual harassment of domestic workers as one of the first issues that they addressed, the survey and study that was done on the issue, issues of theft and caste discrimination that they gradually began to address and the gradual politicisation of the workers that led to the formation of the union in 2008.

### The Forming of a Collective Consciousness: The Beginnings through Mewa Bharathi's Eyes.

I began going with Harkeshji to student meetings, rallies and morchas and never really understood what they were all about. Slowly I began to understand and develop an affinity to these issues. In 1998 there were two big incidents of rape in Rajasthan that started a big movement against sexual violence. In Bhirmal a Jain Muni raped a devotee and in JC Bose hostel a gang rape happened of a well-known journalist's daughter. The protests to build up public awareness and bring pressure on the government went on for more than one and a half months. I met so many people and was inspired by activist like Kavita Srivastava, Aruna Roy, Mamta Jaitley, journalist Shivprakash. They all encouraged me to learn, study, write and I joined their organisation Vividha. I liked writing stories that started getting published. Before this I used to teach street children and I worked with nomadic tribes. I then joined AIPWA and started to enlist women as members. I continued to work in Vividha and made a directory of women journalists. I also used to regularly visit the Labour Adda where workers and contractors would come together and I started becoming friends with the women and got them into the union. At the time of the



drought between 2000 and 2004, we started a community kitchen for those labour working on the roads in a space given to us by the Housing Board. Calling it “Mehnath Kash ki Roti” we supplied food with the help of PUCL for Rs.5 for three years.

### **Rape of a minor domestic worker**

One of the first cases we handled was that of a 14-year-old domestic worker from Cooch Behar who was raped by her employer in 2004. She got pregnant. Her aunt took her out of the house and brought her to us. The employer offered her Rs 5 lakhs and promised to get her married so that she would withdraw the case. She refused and wanted him arrested. From the Collector’s office she got a compensation of Rs 25,000 and the employer too was arrested and jailed for 6 months. We kept her in a shelter home and used to meet her often. She told us about two other girls from Cooch Behar who were also missing. After she had the child, we persuaded her to give her away to a home.

This was when we started looking at the issue of domestic workers. Jagori helped me to take up this issue systematically and seriously and facilitated me with a fellowship. I took up the responsibility of doing a study of 500 women which took me 8 months to complete. It was a difficult process since the women were very suspicious about why I wanted to talk to them. Two volunteers helped me with the data collection. We studied women in 12 bastis. Not surprisingly nobody spoke out against sexual harassment. Slowly 2 to 3 cases came to our notice.

### **Molestation of a minor in the workspace**

One of the cases was that of a young girl who was refusing to accompany her mother to one of the three houses she was working in. She would cry and say “I don’t want to go there.” There was an old man who used to tell her to leave the child with him when she went inside to work. One day when she came out unexpectedly, she saw him fondling the child in inappropriate places. She was



shocked and came and told us about this. We wanted to file a case in the police station but she refused saying that she would lose her job. So yes these cases happen but nobody wants to come out and speak about them.

IDS, Jaipur helped me to collate the data that Jagori published in 2006. A meeting was organised for which the Labour Secretary, who was quite sympathetic and cooperative, came. I took about 10-15 domestic workers for the release of this report after ensuring that they got leave from their work. They came spending their own money and all dressed in their best saris. The commissioner and other officers heard the whole report and were shocked to listen to some of the stories. Some of them expressed disbelief that domestic workers were still being mistreated to this extent. They even took it personally saying, “As if we don’t give our domestic workers tea or refuse to give them water or make such little payments. You are just exaggerating and saying whatever you want.” At this point, Kamlesh, one of the women from the collective rose to speak and said, “every word in this report is true and speaks of our reality. We know what we go through. How do you know what happens in your homes once you go to work...how your wives and relatives treat us? Not giving us tea in a proper cup, refusing to give us drinking water, asking us to drink directly from a tap...paying us wages as low as Rs 200 and making us over work without compensating us... not allowing us to use the bathrooms in the house.... We keep quiet since we don’t want to lose the jobs we have. In fact we did not want to speak when this didi came to talk to us. We kept chasing her away but she kept coming back and she extracted the truth from us bit by bit.” Some of the officers still remained sceptical and even commented on how well dressed Kamlesh was as if she had no right to wear a nice sari. But the Labour Commissioner totally believed us and expressed his shock at the maltreatment. He said he would do whatever we wanted to help improve the situation. We went back to the bastis and started deeper conversations among

the domestic workers and I also got a chance to understand for myself the ground realities. A lot of stories about domestic violence against the workers also started emerging.

One day when I was going around distributing pamphlets in Sanjaynagar, Kamlesh asked me to come to her house. I knew the employer vaguely since she also came from my community. The employer asked me to come inside and sit down and asked me why I was doing such useless work. Why could I not take up something that was more meaningful? I told her that we could talk about such things later and gave her a pamphlet. I asked Kamlesh to come and sit with us. The employer then went to bring us tea. She brought my tea in a good cup and Kamlesh's tea was in a katori. I refused to have the tea and told the lady that I work with Kamlesh, so how can I drink in a better cup. I asked her to give me also tea in a katori. Under this pressure she finally gave Kamlesh tea in a similar cup. But the next day Kamlesh was pulled up and asked what she thought she was doing asking for equality and rights. But Kamlesh is strong and she challenged the owners by saying that she worked in their house and expected dignity and fair treatment the same way bhaiyya went to office and expected to be treated well. "Oh so you are becoming a leader!" was the response.

### **A collective response to allegations of theft**

In 2007, another case came up in which a deputy superintendent's son had beaten up a domestic worker on charges of theft. I was in the labour department that day when Kamlesh called to inform me about what had happened. By the time I went all the women had gathered on the terrace of one of the houses. We also had come to know by then that this boy had beaten two other domestic workers earlier. Both he and his mother used to misbehave with domestic workers. He was also known to beat up his own wife.

The domestic worker was pregnant and badly beaten. All the women were very angry and wanted to take strong action. We immediately

went to the police station where the incharge officer was also shocked to see the wounds and injuries that he had inflicted even on her stomach with a lathi. He told us to go and get a medical certificate after which they immediately registered an FIR. But by the time the police went to his house to arrest him, the boy had run away. We all decided to gather in a neighbourhood park since by then about 150 domestic workers had already come together. There were women from all over – Cooch Behar, Rajasthan and UP. Somehow the boy had gotten hold of the telephone number of Harkesh and people from his side were calling him up to threaten him but we went ahead with our meeting. Neighbours also joined in. In the meantime, we had kept the domestic worker safe in a small office that had been given to us by another woman who herself was a victim of violence at the hands of her sons and wanted us there as her protection! After some months, the boy came forward and publicly apologised in the police station and also gave compensation to the woman. She also did not want to press charges since she said that she was not from here and wanted to go back to her village in UP.

## **2.3 Unionising for their Rights against Wrongs**

The idea for forming a union from the existing collectives slowly crystallised and it was formally registered on April 24, 2008. It was called the Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union since they were working in slum communities where women were doing all kinds of work and they wanted the union to be inclusive of all forms of labour. Membership cards were printed and distributed that the women started carrying like a badge of honour. They would show their cards to their employers every time they missed work to come for a meeting or to prove that they needed to go for a meeting. Some employers tried dissuading them from joining the union saying that they would get cheated. But being part of the union started giving everybody a sense of security and safety, especially with the police, at times when they were accused of theft, which had become



a common practice, especially when owners did not want to pay the higher wages the women demanded and would want to get rid of her in order to get another worker at lower wages; or when children who stole their parent's money would blame the domestic worker. The card helped to establish some legitimacy at the time of arrests, etc. It also saved them from police harassment when they would return home late after cooking for the parties for their employers. In the time of demonetisation it was very useful to open bank accounts, apply for Aadhar etc.

### **2.3.1 Minimum Wages**

One of the first demands of the union was for minimum wages and for a law on domestic work similar to the one the Maharashtra government had passed. Subsequently, the government did bring out a notification on minimum wages and in 2010 a law on domestic work was also passed under the then Congress government under perhaps electoral compulsions. But it remained on the shelves for lack of funds. Later the BJP government that came to power, cited lack of funds, infrastructure and human resources as impediments to implement the law said that it would include domestic work under the Unorganised Sector Act. So now that law has become redundant.

### **2.3.2 Widening Membership**

The union was initially registered with 100 members. The membership drive that was launched subsequently was not in pursuit of numbers. After much discussion on what the membership would involve it was decided that members would not be admitted directly. Extensive community meetings were held in different localities in which issues related to domestic work were discussed including its devaluation, much like the work that all women do in the house; the legal status of domestic work; the schemes available within the government and what the union's priorities would be. Only after they got a deeper awareness of the issues, the workers were encouraged to come forward and ask to become members. Today the membership is 16,500 strong.



### **2.3.3 Accessing State Benefits**

The union ensures that all the members have all the basic cards including the Right to Food card, BhaMaSha card and Aadhar card, that enable them to access benefits including scholarships, tool kits, life insurance, health insurance, etc. The worker facilitation centre plays a major role in ensuring that the women have all the documentation and knowledge of all these different schemes.

### **2.3.4 Worker's Facilitation Centre**

Set up as part of the EC-PIE project, the union runs five worker facilitation centres each of which is located in the different colonies where they work. The office opens at 9.45 am which is when people start coming in to ask about the different schemes available for workers including scholarships for education, Bhamasha cards, Shubh Shakthi for women, pensions for women, the Tool kit yojana, Aadhar, Food card, bank accounts, etc.

The workers are helped with filling in of the forms and also with the follow up till they get the benefits of the scheme they have applied for. Every day at least 5 to 20 people come in. Workers who come are largely from in and around the area where the WFC is located but some people also come from far distances.

Issues like non payment of wages by employees and contractors are also taken up. The community coordinators take turns in coming and sitting in the Centre.

All members have to pay a membership fee which is Rs 50 for domestic workers and Rs 100 for construction workers.

In one centre over the past one and a half years, around 2,500 workers have been supported.

These workers' facilitation centres are an important tool for mobilising and strengthening the membership of the union that needs to be sustained beyond the life of this project if it has to retain its obvious

dynamism. If the union withdraws and it gets absorbed as an arm of the labour department then it may become another moribund bureaucratic institution that only pushes papers and applications rather than a vibrant workers' body.

### 2.3.5 Advocacy on Rights

After they came under the minimum wages regulation as unskilled labour, the domestic workers have at least received recognition as workers. Now the minimum wages in Rs 6,742 for 8 hours of work with one hour of rest in between and four days off in a month. But the women are earning much more than this. By working in a minimum of 4 houses they earn at least Rs 8,000 and some even up to Rs 30,000 if they are cooking. In fact we were told that the women earn much more here than in Delhi.

To spread greater awareness about this the union has printed pamphlets with the government and ILO directives that the women workers show to their employers, thereby warning them about the rules and regulations.

There is a love hate relationship with the labour department that frequently accuses the union of organising migrant Bangladeshi labour. There is also a sort of thinking in the department that unions should not exist and that they would prefer to take up individual cases. However, the current labour officer is very positive. Despite the fact that generally the labour department may not be positive towards the union they do recognise the specificity of domestic work in the context of unorganised labour. In fact Mewa Bharathi is currently on the Unorganised Labour Board representing the interests of the domestic workers. She is also on the sexual harassment committee of the labour department.

When we went to get ration card for a single migrant woman along with a senior representative of the PUCL, the chief secretary rejected the application saying that these were all migrant labour. But we also challenged and fought back saying, “why? are they not citizens of this country?” “If these are Bangladeshis then you will

be in trouble since it is your responsibility to conduct an enquiry and send them back to their country.” A lot of debate followed at the end of which an order was passed to the effect that a single migrant woman could get a ration card based on the documents that she had, even if it was from another state.

**– Mewa Bharathi**

### **2.3.6 Dealing with Theft**

Accusations of theft are almost regular in a domestic workers life given the class and caste prejudices and biases that inform their realities. However, due to their financial vulnerabilities there are cases in which the domestic worker is also guilty. It is a learning experience how the union has learnt to deal with this complex issue in a way that neither ethical values are compromised nor is injustice meted out to anyone. The individual aberration is always understood in the context of the collective stigmatisation of all domestic workers as potential thieves and strategies are evolved accordingly.

A full time live-in worker was once accused of theft. It was a family of four comprising the wife, the husband and their two sons. All of them used to go out to work. The woman used to live out of Jaipur and come home once in 15 days. Her gold bangles were stolen and she accused the domestic worker saying that nobody else could have done it since the keys were on the almirah. The domestic worker was taken to the police station where she denied the allegations. We also questioned her independently and she denied it with us too. We helped her leave the house and a month later it was discovered that it was the domestic worker's son and husband living with her who had taken the bangles and sold them. The Malkin took back the case and forgave her. It was sad that the mother had to take blame for what her son and husband did.

When we find that the domestic worker is in the wrong then we talk and counsel her. Even if she does steal, we have little choice but to

support her, as otherwise we will all be indicted. But we deal with her individually and warn her that this should not happen again.

In another case a domestic worker had stolen something and the employer's son saw and told his mother. The employer did not accept it since she trusted her maid totally. They put a CCTV camera in the house and caught her on camera stealing again. The Malkin called the union leader home, gave her tea and showed her the evidence and asked "now what should I do?" We told her to take whatever action she thought was right. She sent her out of the house and finally the domestic worker went back to Bengal.

When new members come into the union we speak to them about ethics and responsibility and tell them that we do not accept stealing.

There are some areas in Jaipur where the allegations are always false. It is a bad area for domestic workers. We did a rally there protesting against this with slogans and placards saying "Chori ka jhoota ilzaam lagana band karo band karo!!"

**-Meena Sarma and Rama,  
Community Activists**

## **2.4 Structure and Pedagogy**

Over the years, a structure has evolved to draw in women, deepen their awareness and strengthen their leadership capacities. Weekly meetings, study circles, events like the Mahila Sammelan and collective crisis interventions on issues related to their personal and professional lives are some of the ways in which this is being done.

### **2.4.1 Regular Meetings**

Since there was a need to identify common spaces and fix regular meetings it was decided to meet for four times in a month in public parks on the days that they take leave or have their weekly off. These meetings



are the spaces in which they discuss their common problems and what collective action could perhaps be taken.

### **2.4.2 Study Circle**

As part of these regular meetings a study circle is held on the 30th of every month in the office. The issues that are discussed are those that have emerged from their demands and needs as for instance how to file FIRs, how to deal with the police, how to cope with domestic violence, etc. Apart from this, sessions are also organised on how minimum wage is fixed, how gender is constructed in society and other such related issues. These sessions are hugely popular with the women and on an average 30 to 40 women participate. There was one such session in which 53 women participated. The women who come for these meetings include new members who want to learn, already established local leaders and those who have been part of the union for about 6 to 7 years and are willing to take responsibilities.

### **2.4.3 Support Group for Domestic Violence**

The union is also an important personal space for the women since they are each other's support group in cases of domestic violence which is an issue that is addressed seriously at different levels including individual counselling, collective action and capacity building. For instance, to enable them to understand and deal with these forms of violence in more effective ways, a five day workshop was organised in which 92 women participated. Plans are afoot for setting up of regular counselling centres within different localities to deal with the enormity of the issue. They have dealt with more than 300 cases of domestic violence out of which 165 have been resolved.

We have realised that domestic violence is a great equaliser that brings the domestic worker and her employer together. For finally, the man is the same whether he is a worker or whether he is Adani...and when it comes to violence, women are all the same. If there is a friendship then they talk to each other it. It has also seen that domestic violence happens largely to those women who stay at

home. The working women leave the house early and such incidents are rare. For example Kalpana, a domestic worker, counsels her own employer who is as much a victim of domestic violence as she is. Since Kalpana is strong and has found ways of dealing with it, she has been able to give her employer a lot of moral support. She has even invited her to come for our meetings to get some support.

Now we are beginning to think that when we celebrate March 8, we should ask the women to bring their men also as also their children and make it like a mela where they eat and discuss together. Only when the husband becomes a true partner to his wife, can she be really at peace. So it becomes a larger dialogue on equality between the genders and a kind of collective counselling! We have to evolve more creative solutions and models. Traditional ideas will not work anymore. We are resolved to celebrate March 8 very differently now.

– Harkesh Bugalia

#### 2.4.4 Collective Leadership

There are about 90 women who have been identified as leaders after having gone through this process and these are the ones who take the primary responsibility for organising major events like the Mahila Sammelan.

**Mahila Sammelan:** Mahila Sammelans are being organised every year since 2011. All the women get together and take care of all the arrangements. They work very hard, form small groups and go around collecting donations late in the night. Stalls are also put up outside the venue to collect donations. Each time the focus of the Sammelan is different. For instance the problem taken up once was the core issues of identity cards for migrant workers and their families without which they can not access any social welfare benefits – be it voter cards, ration cards, pension, scholarship for children, etc. A range of people are invited as resource people including local leaders, government representatives, MLAs, members of State Human Rights Commission and the Women's

Commission, local organisations, etc. It helps when they come and listen directly to these voices. All this has helped to resolve some of the problems. As for instance the problem of scholarships was resolved with the government accepting that it will recognise the documents from their home state here in Rajasthan too in order to consider their applications. Almost 2,000 women come together for these sammelans that have become a very good advocacy tool. The women themselves demand the organisation of these meetings that are a high point in their lives.

In the monthly meetings we give the women the responsibility of reaching out to other women and bringing them to meetings. Then we make their cards and start involving them in our programmes including collecting donations for our programmes and resolving cases that they are taking the initiative to do on their own. As for instance one employer did not pay the wages. The committee brought together some 35 women and went together, spoke to him, got the money and then informed us on the phone. Our activists even help the women from their area to get their cards, etc. Even when we get calls from our members about theft cases, we tell them to talk to the woman and the employer and see if there is any basis in the allegation. If we take up a theft case without verifying for ourselves whether it is true or not then it will ultimately hit our credibility. If there is any truth to the allegation, we tell the employer to take whatever action they think fit. If the accusations are false and are aimed to harass the domestic worker then we go to the police. We have even asked the employers to apologise to the workers to redeem their name. They close the case after accepting that the money, as is usually the case, has been picked up by some member of the family. They even ask them to come back to work and the domestic worker refuses saying that you have falsely accused us. Then other women also boycott that house.

**-Meena Sarma**  
**community activist**

Our focus is not on the dimension of “labour” but on the entire human being. Women’s emotional empowerment is important. The tools we use are not the different laws related to labour and violence but also history. History of strong women and men is for instance part of the motivational bouquet through which we build resistance.

We also do capacity building through time management – a concept learnt from Gandhi. As part of leadership development, we work on not only the art of giving “bhashan” but also a capacity to discuss ideas. We attempt to constantly reconstruct ourselves through the different resource people we invite to be with us.

Our goal is to encourage the women and workers to “jabaan chadaana” i.e. increase bargaining power at all levels. Therefore, our biggest indicator of success is when the women begin to talk back or retort.

After being empowered through these skills, they are well equipped to bargain for better wages and working conditions. Today they are very strong and confident and even mobile since many of them go around on their scooters!

Our basic approach revolves around training the women in human values.

**-Harkesh Bugalia**

## **2.5 Relationship with Other Networks and Unions**

While the RKMU is independent, it is a member of the National Domestic Workers Platform that comprises around 73 organisations. While they have good relations with the mainstream unions but the unions, especially the CPI and CPM, have no great regard for issues related to domestic workers.

Mainstream political parties or central trade unions don’t come to us since they devalue both domestic work and women’s unions.



I remember once there was a meeting that was organised on the domestic workers law by the labour department. Many women's organisations had also come. But in the course of the meeting the central trade unions got up and walked out saying what is this, the only focus seems to be women.

**– Mewa Bharathi**

## **2.6 Some Voices from Within**

In this section are included excerpts from a conversation between a domestic worker and her employer, an interview with the former president of the union and finally a collective collage of voices of the workers and activists – through all of which we hope to capture and encapsulate the diverse dimensions and the multilayered impact of a holistic and structural approach to challenging and changing labour relationships within the gendered sector of domestic work.

### **2.6.1 Challenging the Employer/Employee Hierarchy**

A conversation with Kalpana Atraya and Kanika, the domestic worker who works in Kalpana's house was most interesting. She and Kanika seem to have democratised the employer-employee relationship without compromising on its human dimension. It not only seems equal and open but is also marked with a lot of affection that is not apparently patronising. Kanika obviously is very much at home in this house. She sits easily next to her "Bhabhi" on the sofa and talks about their relationship and work. She takes the initiative to go inside and bring us tea and snacks without asking her employer. Class and caste divides appear blurred and the relationship, as they keep stating, is not so much professional as it is based on personal trust and respect. Kalpana has studied in BITS Pilani. She is married with two daughters both of who are in the Army and one is a doctor who has studied in the AFMC, Pune. Kanika, Kalpana states repeatedly, is like her third daughter. The two elder daughters too treat her like their younger sister to the extent of even sharing their clothes, etc. Kalpana's husband is a surgeon in the government hospital who is doing some research on the unlikely

combination of astrology and medicine. One of her daughters is also a tarot card reader. While “money does not matter in our relationship” expressed by both seemed genuine, one hopes that the ambiguity does not mask an economic and emotional exploitation. Some excerpts from the conversation:

“Kanika has been with me for the past 12 years. She is like my daughter. In fact she is my daughter’s age. We all look forward to her presence in the house since she brings so much of positivity. When she was younger she had a lot of bachpana in her. She would fight with everybody including her husband. I would calm her down. Her two children have grown up in our house. She is bringing them up with a lot of responsibility. She sends them for dance classes and for tuitions. Apart from our house she works in 6 other houses where she does only cooking. Here she does all the work. She is so efficient. For my daughters wedding she cooked for more for than 200 people.”

Kanika butts in with, “Till I come she does not have her breakfast. We eat together. We go shopping together. She just bought me a sari for Rs 2,000 for her birthday. She has even bought me jewellery. This is my house. Normally when they have their parties then I dress the way they do. I even wear the jeans that belong to her daughter.”

Kalpna continues, “Her income was very low when she first started working. But she is very sharp and intelligent and hard working. She used to cycle to work first. She then bought a motorcycle for her husband. That was when I told her to go and get a scooty for herself. Her children are also doing very well in school. They get medals and prizes like my own children. We want that the children of those around us do as well as ours.”

We move on to talk about the union and what Kalpana felt about it.

“When Kanika became a member of the union I was happy and fully in support of it. Why should I worry about it since it is for her support and

for women like her? It will make a difference in the way society looks at domestic workers. See she rides to work on a gaadi and parks it next to our car. The neighbour did not like it. She tried to push it away from there. Kanika got very upset and told them "What is your problem? Next time I will come to work by car and what will you do?" Finally that woman came and said sorry to me and my husband.

I don't like calling her 'Bai'. Does she not have her own name? People around were very surprised when I used to call her by her name. Now they have also changed and call their maids by their names.

I trust Kanika totally. Bengalis never steal, I leave the house keys with her and I don't lock anything in the house. She has absolutely no greed. In fact I have to force her to take anything in this house. In many cases of theft in fact I know that it is the boys of the house who steal from the family and they put the blame on the poor domestic worker which is so unfair. Yes there are a lot of Bengalis coming into Rajasthan but that is because they have no land or employment back in their villages and they are victims of poverty and ill health.

I have increased Kanika's salary by Rs 400 not so long ago. She does not even ask me for a raise. I increase her salary by Rs 100 automatically every Diwali, every year."

Kanika interjects, "She gets angry with other Bais if they work for less! As for us we have no issues over money at all. Her money is my money and mine is hers. She is always buying me gifts and I keep buying her gifts too!"

Kalpna continues, "I buy her and her husband also the best clothes. He in fact has expensive tastes. I am also buying an insurance policy for her.

She is so bold. She goes home alone even at 2 p.m. after late night events like weddings, etc. But when she goes late from here then we follow her

till she reaches home. She rides as fast as she talks! It is only when she takes me as a pillion and I am sitting behind her that she rides slowly.

Kanika has become an example for everybody. I have done nothing for her; it is all because of her hard work and nature. Her confidence levels are so high. She is even on facebook and is trying to persuade me to come onto it! My daughter who is also a tarot card reader has said that she will buy a house soon.

Kanika keeps telling me to get her id verified but why do I need that?

I am willing to do anything for her welfare. There should in fact be a crèche for the children of domestic workers so that they can go to work in peace."

### **2.6.2 A Seasoned Leader: Kamlesh Pahadiya**

Kamlesh is one of the oldest members of the Union that she has been a part of since 2006. Earlier, she was also its President. Her strength belying her frail looks, she sits down and remembers the times and the protests gone by. Starting with her struggles in her own house with her husband who was not very happy about his wife going out to become a public "neta"! She is happy with her own growth as a fearless employee and an inspiring leader as also the changes that have happened vis-a-vis employers' attitudes over the past years. Her very clear but nuanced stands on their rights, employers' responsibilities and the ethics of domestic workers came out in a long conversation in the course of which she served us some delicious tea!

"In the early years when I first joined the union, in one of the colonies I worked a domestic worker was beaten up by her employer's son when she had asked for higher payment. She was pregnant. A construction worker linked with the union sent her to us. We came together in the area, had a meeting and lodged a case against the boy whose father was a deputy inspector of Police. He threatened all of us. But we remained strong. About 100 of us came together. Many of the employers who I had



convinced were with us in our struggle in spirit if not physically. It was at that time that I developed the reputation of a “neta” in that area which I accepted since I did work hard to raise these issues. Subsequently the boy came and apologised and she also got compensation. The atmosphere has changed a lot since then.

When we used to go out into the field, there was no sense of time! Initially my husband used to be angry and tried to stop me from going out but Mewa didi convinced him about what I was doing. I learnt how to talk about our rights, about the law...We have taken out so many rallies to bring awareness and draw more women into the union. We did a 10 day campaign last December in which we all wore red saris, sang songs, played the dholak...we covered the whole of Jaipur! We used to start at the labour adda at 8 in the morning and go into all the different streets. The domestic workers would all come out saying...come to my galli, come to my galli!

I now work in 10 houses and earn an average of Rs 15,000. I get about Rs 1,000 to Rs 3,000 from each house depending on the work that I do there. Most of my employers are good with me. They know that I will speak up if I feel that something is not right. In one of the houses where the employer started getting angry without any reason with the other workers in the house I warned her, “Why are you suddenly speaking like this? The others are grumbling about you. Please be careful.” After this she changed her behaviour and is talking affectionately again. This Maalkin is the director of a college and the Malak is a big officer. She is a Punjabi and he is a Rajasthani. They have two daughters – one is a student and the other works in a hotel. Having so many servants in the house is a status symbol for them. The others don't protest, they only grumble. I protest which is why the employers treat me correctly!

Whenever we brought out some pamphlets for our public rallies and programmes, I would go and show them to my employers saying “please read this to me since I don't know how to read”. And it would be about our minimum wages and other working conditions!! The employers would laugh and say, “You are very clever Kamlesh!”

My daughter is also a domestic worker like me. Her employers too look after her very well.

### 2.6.3 A Collage of Collective Voices

The three days spent in Jaipur were packed with interactions and meetings. What stood out was not only the clarity of perspective and history of the union and its very systematic processes of building the individual woman and its collective membership but also the women themselves. It is clear that they are the products both of their own individual journeys that have been hard and troubled but also the collective journey that has been empowering, joyful and challenging. The images are indelible:

- » 30 women were sitting in the pouring rain through which they had walked and bussed to come to the temple in the centre of Vaishalinagar where we have gathered to speak sitting on banners that were quickly converted to chattais that were laid out on the slushy floor. Each one is dressed more colourfully than the other – almost all of them wear the traditional red and white bangles that most Bengali Hindu women wear. The rain had not dampened their spirits. Talking animatedly without pause about husbands, theft allegations, sexual harassment, unfair dismissal from work, lack of holidays, children running away, non-payment of wages, landlord problems, inability to access schemes for migrant children, the labour union, the domestic workers union.... in short talking about the world and their homes.
- » Watching and listening to an animated Kanika talk along with her employer Kalpana about their personal lives and the status of domestic workers.
- » Sitting in the worker facilitation centre listening to Meena and Rama, the two extremely committed community activists talk about the nitty gritty of their work with organising the women and also their own personal lives. Meena quietly and seriously confronting the conservatism of her family who have now come to respect the work she does. Fast talking and quick to laughter Rama's own life story itself can go into a book – of her struggles of growing up in a village

where nobody educated their daughters. Her father did - much to the disparaging remarks of their neighbours. Brought up like a boy she started riding the cycle even when in the third standard and taking her younger brother and elder sister triples to school. Going to college against all odds and working part time as part of an ICDS project as a research assistant; fighting sexual harassment at her workplace by slapping her boss and dealing with the fallout of being threatened by goondas on her own – by threatening them back in equally colourful language; being pushed into marriage against her will but making the best of it; doing her MSW even while pregnant with her daughter and ending cheerfully with "I fight with everybody! But I fight not for myself but for others!"

- » Sitting in Gayatri's little house that she proudly says she has bought with her earnings in a slum in Sanjaynagar. The space dominated by a huge bed on which all of us sit that has a colourful bedspread. The house is spick and span with everything in its place. Including some colourful drawings and paintings done by her daughter and son, Roshni and Vishal. Bold and bright Roshni wants to become a police officer while a more subdued but well tattooed Vishal wants to join the IAS and buy a Royal Enfield. Gayatri (from West Bengal) is justifiably proud of both her children who are studying well and speak impeccable English. As we talk to Raheema (from Bihar), Manju (from Rajasthan) and Sunita (from Bihar) about their experiences and perceptions, Gayatri with some help from her cousin and friends quickly puts together, in less than 45 minutes, a most delicious meal for all of us and lays it out most professionally on a little table cloth on the bed – soft fluffy rotis, a delicious bhaji with some sharp Rajasthani chillies, some melt in the mouth dal, perfectly cut salad of cucumber, tomatoes and lime - and all topped with little katoris of thick delicious curd. Little wonder that with such sharp honing of their skills, increased self-confidence and sense of collective ownership of a union that clearly sustains them both personally and professionally. Gayatri can tell us confidently:

"What I am now is because of the union. Earlier, we used to be scared of our employers and of the police. Some maliks are good and some are

bad. Now when they are bad, we don't leave them. Earlier when they used to look at us in a leering way we used to lower our eyes. Now we look straight into their eyes and ask them "what are you looking at?" I have even confronted several husbands, right in front of their wives. I am not scared. Earlier we were afraid of the police. We used to bend and say 'Haanji saab' now we say 'Sarkar has appointed you to protect and take care of us, so don't do any jabardasti!' Now I know what my entitlements are from the government. I have got all the cards that I need to access the different schemes. I like cooking and learning new things – I even know how to make pizza and tacos. I have bought a house now and will now focus on earning for my children's needs and education. I go to work on a scooty and when one employer asked me 'Oh you drive a scooty'? I told her 'Madam I will soon come on a Royal Enfield!'"

The poster on the wall drawn by her daughter perhaps sums up their philosophy: Like a flower we should all bloom.





## Chapter III

# **Montford Social Institute: A Case study on Advocacy in Domestic Work**

NGOs and activist groups from Hyderabad have been leading the advocacy on the policy and the Bill on domestic workers both at the national and international levels. Inspired by the work of Sister Jeanne Devos who started setting up domestic workers groups in Tamil Nadu and Bombay in the mid-eighties which led to the launch of the National Domestic Worker's Movement in the nineties that spread to 17 states including Hyderabad, the work of Sister Lizzie and Brother Varghese ensured that a Church based welfare-oriented initiative shifted into union mode in the 2000s. Their clear vision of change revolves around putting in place appropriate legislation that is seen as the primary solution for the existing problems of domestic workers. On account of the high numbers of domestic workers who were members of their organisations, they began getting the necessary accreditation which ensured that they were called to international fora like the ILO. Their lobbying efforts ensured that domestic work was declared as decent work through Convention 189 adopted in 2011 that has been signed by India but which remains to be ratified by bringing its own laws in compliance by passing appropriate legislation. On account of Montford Social Institute (MSI) and Br. Varghese's sustained advocacy and lobbying at the state, national and international levels that has borne considerable fruit, we have chosen to track this aspect of their work in this narrative. However this work has to be located in the context of their overall approach that includes its earlier and ongoing focus on housing rights, strengthening domestic worker unions as the primary bargaining bodies to access rights from the State and evolving more equitable and

dignified relationships with the employers even while improving working standards, life skills and incomes of the domestic workers.

### **3.1 Domestic workers, Campaign for Housing and Tenurial Rights and the Musi Bachao Andolan: A Historical Link between Labour, Homelessness and Rights**

The work of the Montford Social Institute with domestic workers has its roots in CHATRI, the Campaign for Housing and Tenurial Rights that was born after the Musi Bachao Andolan in 1997.

The Musi river was the lifeline of the Hyderabad city that originates in Vikarabad and flows into the Krishna and has an interesting history that belies its tragic present.

When Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (fifth king of the Quli Qutb Shahi dynasty) decided to shift his capital outside the Golconda Fort and founded Hyderabad in 1591, the location was strategically chosen – to build a new city on the banks of the Musi river. Unfortunately in 1908, a heavy downpour resulted in Hyderabad witnessing devastating floods, killing thousands. The incident prompted Osman Ali Khan (1911-1948), the seventh and last Nizam of the erstwhile state of Hyderabad, to construct the Osmansagar and Himayathsagar lakes in the first half of the 20th century, about 30 km away from the city, to check water from flowing into the river.

While that solved the flooding problem, it killed the river. Today Musi has become a cesspool that flows for 57 km across Hyderabad, something that Osman Ali Khan probably would have never envisaged.

The Telegu Desam party led by Chandrababu Naidu wanted to beautify the Musi river and initiated the Nadavanan Project, a short sighted attempt to beautify the Musi river with little thought either for its long term regeneration or the impact it would have on the people living around it. For this cosmetic beautification revolved around confining the

river into a canal and removing the slums that were on its banks. As part of this drive, 46 slums would be removed and almost 20,000 people would be evicted. Br. Varghese, the current Director of MSI, was then living and working in one of the slums and was at the forefront of the agitation initiated to withdraw the project that would directly affect the slum dwellers.

Supported by the NAPM, the Musi Bachao Andolan, a forum of 27 organisations was successful in that in 2000, the project was withdrawn but by then 6000 people had been displaced and relocated in the Nandavanam colony 16 kms away from the city.

CHATRI pioneered the fight for the housing rights of the displaced slum dwellers as part of which Br. Varghese started PIN (People's Initiative Network).

MSI started in 2009, but 29 years ago in 1990, I started living in a slum. With the focus on education, we began work in 27 schools and also with the youth. We first started working with adolescent girls and then also began forming women's groups with the focus on generating awareness on family planning, etc. Our focus was on raising the age of marriage from 13 to 14 years to at least 16 to 17 years through skill training programmes for girls. One girl did so well that she started a canteen and even employed her parents. It became a popular case that was adopted in 600 slums.

After this we started looking at other forms of labour. A huge percentage of women were doing domestic work that was not recognised as a form of labour. No law or union recognised them. We started forming small groups of women who were also domestic workers. All this was part of the People's Initiative Network of which Sr. Lizzie was also a part. She too was living in the slum that was in Chaadargah in Musanagar. Sr Lizzie then subsequently moved out and started working only on domestic work as part of the National Domestic Workers Movement. I then went away and



came back in 2009 and started the Montford Social Institute and the core areas we focussed on were housing and domestic work. In 2011, ActionAid Association came in to support urban issues in a small way. The Rosa Luxemborg Foundation came and helped us to spread out to 12 towns across Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The EC-PIE project came in 2014-15 and we took it up in 4 towns i.e. Nalgonda, Wanarpathy, Guntur and Suryapet. Now there is a major decline in slum population in big cities.

The demography of the urban city is changing with privatisation and gated colonies that are exclusive spaces for the rich and middle class. There is no space for slums that are being thrown out to the edges of cities. Apartments are being built under the JNURM for which there are no takers. The migration now is therefore into smaller towns that are showing an increase in slums. Situation of domestic work there is worse than in a city on account of persisting feudal relations. The work with domestic workers intersects with the work with children and housing rights in the same slums since slums are the feeders of services to the cities and towns.

– Br. Varghese

### **3.2 Community Networking: Laying the Foundation for Unionising, Building Employer-Employee Relationships and Skill Training**

When the domestic workers were first being organised into smaller groups the attempt was to bring in the methodology of the Neighbour Community Network (NCN) in which the leadership was bottom upwards.

Ten workers were organised into one group that elected its own leader. 30 groups were organised in each town with 300 members and 30 leaders. The 30 leaders were trained, out of which seven would be elected to be part of the larger state level leadership. Every member contributed Rs 10 and small support was facilitated for marriage, death, education, hospitalisation, etc.

Under the EC-PIE project, MSI has now formed 129 collectives with a total of 1290 members. Each collective has 10 members. These groups now have become the foundation for the building up of the union at the state level. The process followed for building these groups and the primary activities around which they were organised include:

- » Confirmation/selection of town level NGOs and appointment of field coordinators
- » Formation of neighborhood groups of domestic workers and selection of unit level leaders for every ten workers
- » Two day state level workshop of NGO partners and field coordinators
- » Two town level one day training of grass-root leaders
- » Monthly meeting of 10 member units
- » Engagement with employers – Selfies/Meetings
- » Meetings and negotiations with people's representatives/labour department
- » Skill training on making of phenol, washing powder, shampoo, etc
- » Engaging the collective on crisis intervention in domestic violence and other personal family issues
- » Interventions with employers on working conditions, leave, salary increase, etc

MSI has registered 1,168 domestic workers and got access to social security schemes that include the Pradhanamantri Suraksha Bima Yojana, Pradhanmantri Jivan Jyoti Bima Yojana, Jandhan Yojana, National Pension Scheme, National Family Benefits Scheme and the Jan Surksha Yojana-11.

Our approach is that we network with an organisation that is already working and we add the labour perspective. In every town we have a partner who monitors the work. As of now we are working in 11 towns including the EC-PIE projects. We have brought in the

dimension of skill training in all the 11 towns. Now the trade union structure is the primary one and by the end of June 2019, we want to increase the membership to 5,000.

**Br. Varghese**

### **3.2.1 Community Mobilising in Suryapet: Some Insights from a Field Visit to Suryapet**

Suryapet district with a population of about 16.85 lakhs sits at the junction of three national highways linking it to other states. Suryapet city is the most populous city in Suryapet and it has a floating population of approximately 10,000 from the neighbouring villages daily.

As compared to Nalgonda, this district is more urbanised with 3 towns and 279 villages.

The success of any organising greatly depends on the community activists in that region and Anasuyamma is a good example of a committed and effective worker.

She is busy rounding up the domestic workers for our meeting which is eventually held on the terrace of an employers' house which is still under construction. Some kind of matting is found and about 12 of us sit amidst the dust and cement to have our conversation. An extended discussion follows in which it is clear that Anasuyamma plays a central role in organising the workers and sustaining a fairly equanimous and equitable relationship with the employers and is also very well known to the media and local leaders. The women are confident about her leadership and seem to have blossomed and come into their own. She obviously is at home both in the town, among the women and among the employers. Not surprising since she was born and grew up here and knows almost everybody! An extensive conversation with her shows how she has grown along with the women even as they come together as a union to speak for the rights of all domestic workers.

## **Excerpts from the Conversation**

### **Anasuyamma, community coordinator**

“I joined MSI in 2012. Initially I was very frightened and underconfident about domestic workers coming and actually forming into groups that I was entrusted with to create. But Sr. Nirmala and Brother encouraged me greatly and showed me how to work. First I thought I had to talk only to the domestic workers and then realised that the work was much larger – I needed to talk to the media, local political leaders, government representatives and became even more scared. But slowly I gained in confidence and saw it as an opportunity to reach out to the public for the case of the dignity of the domestic workers who needed better working conditions and minimum wages.

I started with doing a survey in which I went from house to house talking to domestic workers. Slowly they started coming out and speaking about their problems, much of which revolved around their husbands.

The husbands too were suspicious when I would talk to their wives and said, “why are you calling our women? Are you going to give us any money?” Once in a meeting a husband came and shouted at me accusing me of misleading his wife but I reassured him that I was actually helping her. But I slowly built up a relationship with both the domestic worker and her husband...calling them “Anna” whenever I met them on the road.

The husbands have now totally changed and have become very cooperative, even offering to inform their wives if there are any meetings.

Slowly I started conducting awareness meetings with the domestic workers, interactions with the employers on issues of minimum wages and weekly leave, skill development meetings including yoga and public meetings/trainings that invited resource people.



Earlier I used to get rather negative reactions even from employers who also felt very threatened. But slowly I became a known face thanks to my regular appearance on the local media – on TV channels and in newspapers. I also put it positively to the employers saying that our fight was not so much with them but with the government for greater benefits since what they were giving would not suffice to sustain the workers. Slowly they have now come over to our side and are also very cooperative.”

We have to work very hard to keep the domestic workers together. This we do by constantly talking to each other and also sharing our personal problems and helping each other surmount them. In Ganeshnagar when one of the women, Padma’s husband got drunk and beat her up, the group went and spoke to him and threatened him that if did not stop beating her she would leave him. He has now stopped beating her although he has not stopped his drinking. But now he helps us organise meetings by coming and tying banners etc!

I always go with the domestic workers when we have to meet local leaders or when we need to apply for ration cards, pensions, government sites, two bedroom flats etc. Every year we organise at least 50 to 60 meetings, all of which has helped to strengthen our work.

### **R. Sandhya, Domestic Worker**

Anasuya came to our house and asked us to join the group to fight for our rights, against our exploitation. She had gone to each house and conducted a survey. Way back in 2012, only five members had come together but slowly we have grown and we all continue to be together since then. I have been working since I was 10 years old along with my mother who used to work in another house. Since I was young, employers used to teach me how to do the work. I never went to school but they took very good care of me. I used

to work in two houses where I got Rs 500 each. The owners had promised to make me a thali when I got married and since they did not fulfil their promise, I got angry and left working in their house. I joined the union last year and I shared this information with my employer. Now they are even more trusting of me and even give me the house and gate keys. One day they had forgotten a bundle of money amidst the clothes which I found and returned to them after which they trusted me even more. I have even taken a selfie with the owner after the coordinator came and spoke to them.

I have one child. My husband is no more. He was an alcoholic and gave me a lot of trouble.

The coordinator is in touch with all the employers. She was born and brought up here and has even studied here. So everybody knows her. She is the one whom all the employers trust and send us for meetings whenever she comes and asks.

### **3.2.2 Building Employer Employee Relationships**

The "Selfie with Employer" initiative has proved to be a fairly effective "best practice" that uses social media and technology to affirm and strengthen a healthy and democratic worker-employee relationship that can also be intimate and personal. Started in 2015, about 100-150 selfies are gathered from each town which are then shared on facebook and twitter.

However, as we heard, many don't want the selfie to be put up, either because they don't get permission from their husbands or because they are dressed inappropriately in nighties! This actually indicates how in this initiative both the employer and employee are circumscribed by the norms of patriarchy and the devalued nature of domestic work – the domestic worker by her female employer and the female employer by her own husband and family. Some negative experiences of taking these selfies without properly affirming the antecedents of the employers were

also shared indicating that this initiative needs to be thought through and deepened without reducing it to a reporting tool.

"Model" employers are identified by the coordinator and judged on the basis of whether they treat the worker equally, share tea with them, pay her decent wages, give her adequate rest, etc. The focus is on building a stronger economic, emotional and informal relationship between the employer and employee that is not confrontational.

Employers are also sought to be included in programmes related to training and income generation. They buy the products that the domestic workers are trained to make including phenol, washing powder, etc. This has improved the employer-employee relationship.

The strength of this relationship was tested during the demonetisation move in 2016 when the employers went out of their way to buy them provisions, transfer money, take care of children's fees, etc.

## **Yakamma's Selfie with Priyanka and Sundaramma**

We go and pick up Yakamma from her little but neat house to meet with two of her employers who, we are told, treat her very well. Yakamma has been working as a domestic worker for 14 years and is from a backward community.

Priyanka, the first employer we meet, we learn comes from the Reddy community. Although the house itself is modest, it is obvious from photographs put up on all the walls of their home that they are well off. They show several happily married couples and their children – all dressed like they are from the cinema industry. Priyanka is the employer's daughter who is married and stays separately but knows Yakamma well. She is fair, smart and courteous.

"First she is a human being and only then she is a maid. I am also a human, married and a home maker.

She has worked with us for 2 years and came through the owners of this house. Yes I do know about Yakamma's involvements with the sangha. She does not start her work without first having tea. We have no distinction between employer and employee. She is paid Rs 3,000 for one hour of work that includes sweeping, swabbing, washing clothes and cleaning of the staircase. She gets new clothes and bonus on special days. Yakamma herself had decided her salary and we had accepted." Priyanka looks confident and is well educated. She has completed her B. Ed. and has two children, one in the 7th standard and the other in 3rd. Her husband is also a teacher but has told his wife to stay at home "It is enough if you teach our children" he has proscribed. Yakamma on her part is assertive and territorial. "I will not allow anybody else to work either in this house or area!"

Priyanka is dressed in her mandatory nightie with a dupatta but is chased inside by Yakamma to change into a salwar kameez when she is asked whether a selfie can be taken. "We are great friends", Yakamma says cheerfully. But she proceeds to sit on the floor next to Priyanka when the selfie is taken.

Ruminating on these contradictions we go to the parallel street where we visit Yakamma's second employer, Sundaramma.

Sundaramma looks hard working and belongs to the middle class. Her faith is painted all over the walls of this modest little house. Christ in all his glory on a blue wall with red Christmas trees, pink bougainvillea, blue skies, green trees...somebody in the house is obviously an artist. We come to know later that the artist is her husband who was also her uncle and a painter by profession. He too was a Reddy but obviously a Christian.

"There was somebody else who worked in our house for 10 years. She grew old and after she left, I used to do all the work myself. But I have also now grown quite old so my children brought Yakamma to help with the housework."



Yakamma intersperses – “even if I work here till the day of my death I would not have repaid my debts!” Sundaramma in turn is all praise for Yakamma – “She is very efficient, responsible and time conscious. She and her daughter love coming here to celebrate Christmas. She has told me all about the organisation she is part of and its work. It is very good that there is an organisation like this to speak up for the thousands of women like Yakamma who are trying to lead lives of dignity. She gets paid Rs 3,000 for all the work that she does in our house where she works for about two hours.”

### **3.2.3 Life Skill and Vocational Training: Some Insights from Field Visit to Nalgonda**

Nalgonda is a district in the Telangana state of India. It has a population of 3,483,648, of which 13.32 per cent was urban as of 2011. There is a growing demand for domestic workers but the salaries are still rather meagre since it apparently retains the character of a small town – both in terms of class and caste composition. It is one of the country's 250 poorest districts and is one of the nine districts in Telangana currently receiving funds from the Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme. The district comprises three towns and 565 villages and therefore is not as urbanised as Suryapet, the other district that was visited.

We go to a lower middle class area that is almost like a village with narrow lanes, small hut like houses and large empty spaces. We sit in the house of Rama's sister-in-law with the Lucy group. It is obviously also the place where they make the products under their income generating programme. Angel Raju with a cap and spectacles is Rama's brother and he is happy to host us in that little space they call their home and gets busy with clicking photographs. Sr. Rosemary the coordinator of this project here presides over the meeting with about 15 women.

When they meet together it is either for some life skill training or awareness raising programmes. Though they don't talk much about personal issues, they do sit and talk about their employers and the working conditions. The union still seems to be at a nascent stage with

most of them not wishing to really take their issues to the street. Nor have they been able to come together to display genuine solidarity with each other.

The different life skills that the women said they have learnt by being part of the group are yoga, awareness programmes with doctors, lawyers and other professionals like tailoring and other life skills. One lady from Warangal wants to open an embroidery unit here which is quite possible. Rama showed some beautiful blouses she had designed and stitched as did other young women. This seemed to have more potential than what would come out of the vocational training that was started one year ago in the training and marketing of washing powder, phenol, hair oil and cold cream. They were given five days of training that included union building processes. They also played games with their children and gave them gifts.

The women felt that making these products would be more fruitful than making pickles, etc as pickles are not much in demand owing to the heat here. Five women from the group are seriously into making these products.

"We prepare these products as and when we get orders, which largely come from hospitals and Christian institutions apart from employers. Every one and a half months we invest about Rs 5,000 after which we take another two months to sell the products that we have produced. Washing powder sells at Rs 120 per kg while phenol is Rs 35 per liter. We get an average profit of about Rs 3,000 to Rs 4,000 on each investment. However, our employers don't buy too many products as they find them expensive. In the big super markets that have come up in the town they get 1 Kg of washing powder along with five soaps for Rs 100. We cannot compete with this! Only institutional sales get us profits. Now we are planning to train in mushroom cultivation that Sister has learnt and will conduct courses on."

The training and income generation programmes however don't seem to be too well thought out in the context of this community and don't seem

to be enhancing either their incomes or their skills in any substantial way. In fact, they seem to be more enthusiastic with their work with embroidery and craft that they have already established a marketing network for. That is earning them a decent amount every month and is also deepening their existing skills.

"Many of us do mirror work after finishing our housework. We all come together to do this. This is done independent of MSI. We also make bangles and earrings with thread. Our Madam who lives in Nalgonda takes out products and supplies them to Hyderabad. Now the MSI sisters are planning to start a centre to train women workers in embroidery work."

To stabilise and strengthen the vocational training and income generation programmes, MSI is planning to link up with other networks and organisations that will help in developing production and marketing skills and networks. MSI is planning to mobilise at least five members from each group to come together for which initial support will be provided. The long term idea is to eventually brand and sell the products through the Unorganised Workers Multipurpose Cooperative that SEWA is helping them to set up. This would include not only domestic workers but also construction workers, homeless people, women farmers, etc.

Proper registration would be done and a monthly contribution will be collected that will build a corpus to give credit that will be recovered at 2 per cent interest per month. The workers will take responsibility for the production and sell their products to the cooperative who will market them and the profits will come back as bonus. Members will get discount on these products. This would be initiated in Hyderabad and then replicated in smaller towns.

This is an ambitious project that obviously would need the long term institutional and financial support from MSI and other agencies like EC-PIES. Once stable, it could provide the autonomous institutional basis for even sustaining and running the union.

### 3.3 Building the Union

Domestic Workers do not have recognition and identity as a worker category; they are not aware of their rights and are mostly illiterate. Domestic workers need to be organised and have their own trade unions to bargain for their rights. The domestic workers' needs are to be advocated by the empowered domestic workers themselves. Domestic workers opt for this profession as a means of survival. The compulsions from family situations force them to opt for this profession. They can be organised for a right cause with awareness and empowerment. Migration was meant to search for a means of livelihood.

Extracts from: A Report of the Socio-Economic Survey of Domestic Workers in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, MSI, Hyderabad

Data on domestic workers in Telangana /Andhra Pradesh as in the rest of India is limited. While major cities such as Hyderabad, Vijayawada and Vishakhapatnam are known to have a large number of domestic workers with the burgeoning middle class as their employers, there is an equally rapid increase in their numbers in the Class II and III towns. A large section of domestic workers come from vulnerable communities and backward areas. Most domestic workers are poor, vulnerable, illiterate, unskilled and do not understand the urban labour market. Domestic work is undervalued and poorly regulated, and many domestic workers remain overworked, underpaid and unprotected. Andhra Pradesh constituted a Welfare Board for unorganised workers under the Act, in which a representative of domestic workers has been included. However, even after almost two years since the Board was constituted, it has not met even once. The Government of India has prepared a draft National Policy on Domestic Workers, but it is yet to be notified.

Domestic workers are that sector of unorganised labour that has not been addressed seriously either by mainstream unions or political parties. The primary reason for this is that they are fragmented and



not easy to organise and also that the form of labour itself is feminised and therefore devalued. "Kya miltha hai inse" is the attitude. Which is why mainstream unions are more than willing to organise construction workers and auto drivers even though they are equally fragmented and not occupying traditional work spaces. The feminisation of domestic work is the largest obstacle perhaps to it being seen as "labour" by mainstream, more masculinised unions.

In 2012, there were debates on whether these groups should be formalised into a union or whether it should remain as the Domestic Working Forum India (DWFI) as it was called. In 2013, the formation of unions was initiated but they could not be registered since the Telangana agitation was at its height.

Subsequently, two independent trade unions were registered in 2017, one in Andhra Pradesh and the other in Telangana. The former, Domestic Workers' Federation (DWF), AP, has a membership of 624 with a monthly membership fee of Rs 5 and the latter, Gruhakarmika Union Telangana State (GUTS), has a membership of 898 with a monthly fee of Rs 10.

While the long term idea is that the unions become independent, there is a need for continued institutional backing. Earlier there had been talks with larger unions like HMS (Hind Mazdoor Sangh) and Sr. Lizzie's union was affiliated to IFTUI. But these initiatives were not really followed up since domestic workers can be reduced to an insignificant group in these large unions and therefore would need to be protected and the focus maintained. Undoubtedly there are advantages of joining central trade unions as big unions too are now paying attention to unorganised sector unions. However the fear of "poaching" is ever present. "For example in the rally in Delhi on August 4 the Congress took over and grabbed centre stage although our numbers were large. CPM too has started SNEHA unions for domestic workers and they too have tried to take over some of our members."

At the national level GUTS and DWF are part of the National Platform for Domestic Workers (NPDW) which is the one that has initiated work on a

bill on domestic workers. In fact several central trade unions are a part of it including HMS, CPM, CPI, SEWA and Congress, apart from 38 other organisations including smaller unions. The specific agenda is to push for an Act on domestic violence. Since domestic work does not come under labour laws, the state is not registering their unions. However, many unions have been registered in southern India.

## **3.4 Some Voices**

### **3.4.1 Lavanya: President of GUTS**

26-year-old Lavanya, thin and slight, seems too young to be the mother of her two sons, let alone the President of a union. But she is full of energy and passion that manifests itself as she starts talking. Both her mother, Balamma and father, Parameshwar passed away when she was in the seventh grade. She was taken care of by her grandmother who put her into a SC hostel in Bhuvangir. She studied till the 10th while her younger brother studied for ITI.

"I started working in 2009. The pay was very low. I was getting Rs 500 for working with a family of five members and doing sweeping, swabbing and washing of clothes. I was working in 13 houses and earned a total of Rs 6,000. Caste discrimination was high. Out of the 13 houses I worked in, only two looked at me as a human being. I could eat in the same plates as them. "It is only because you clean these plates that we can even eat from them" was their simple and obvious logic. A separate glass was kept for me to drink tea in. I was not allowed entry either into the kitchen or to the pooja room. Personally, I felt very disgusted and demeaned especially since in the village I was given a higher status because of my education. In the city, I was made to feel ashamed of myself and what I was doing. I was working in apartments where payment was related to the number of people in the house.

"Before joining the union I thought that I was alone in my suffering. Now I realise that without collectivisation, we cannot fight for our rights. I have seen many changes with employers after the union came into being. I was working in a house near the Hyderabad public school for two hours

everyday. When I asked them for a weekly off, the employer got upset and said, "If you don't come then we will get somebody else." I told them that we were part of a union and that nobody would come and work if I left. They then got scared and gave me what I had asked for. When I had a child, my husband stopped me from working. I gave my job to another girl and I am happy."

"Another senior domestic worker approached me and complained about how her employer was grumbling about the quality of her work. We went to speak to the employer to help sort out the issue. They asked who I was. I told them and further added that the domestic worker could do better quality work if she works in less houses and they can compensate her by paying more. They felt very threatened and in turn they threatened me. But finally they took her back and gave her what she had asked for. I felt very happy and confident that I was able to resolve this issue in a meaningful way."

"Recently I joined work in a house where they gave me rice and chapathi in a plastic cover that really upset me. I threw it away in front of them and came away. I am alright if you share with me your leftover food. But when you give it to your friend you will give it in a box but to me you give in a plastic bag. They told me I was being arrogant. I told them clearly it was an insult to me.

"My husband supports me totally. When other husbands question their wives about why they need to go for meetings, etc. I go and explain to them the work we do on behalf of their wives. Some husbands understand while others don't."

"My group still does not understand or appreciate the benefits of collectivisation. Their constant question is, "so what do we get out of it?" Sometimes I feel that I am forcefully bringing them to meetings. But I continue since I realise the process is slow and we need to take one step at a time."

I have been to the labour office, have gone to Delhi and to Bangalore but ever since I became the President in 2017, I feel I have so much more to understand and learn. The local leaders too don't really acknowledge or recognise my presence. For instance, I have met the MLA twice but each time he has asked me if I am actually a domestic worker. I don't know why!"

### **3.4.2 Mr Gangadhar, Joint Commissioner of Labour**

Although it was a last minute visit it was obvious that Mr Gangadhar was an officer committed to the cause of domestic workers. He was approving of the fact that their work was not even considered a "scheduled employment" till the hard work of the unions made sure that it was included in the labour laws. Now minimum wages have been fixed and they are also working towards a national legislation/policy.

He spoke of migrant labour, especially those who go to the Gulf who frequently fall through the gaps since most of them cannot be registered under the Contract Labour Act that applies to all establishments employing 20 or more contract labourers and to contractors who employ 20 or more contract labourers. Domestic workers usually work with two or more employers and placement agencies too cannot be registered because of this loophole.

"On a pilot basis we have tried registering domestic workers who have been unionised under the Unorganised Social Security Act and the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana. Almost 1,600 – 1,700 workers have been registered in the three mandals of Hyderabad."

He is of the opinion that a board should be formed at the state level under the Social Security Act for domestic workers. This would contribute on behalf of employers and cess can be collected to build up this fund from individual employers and also placement agencies. They can also be covered by ESI and PF.



"At some level while social conditions have changed for domestic workers, at another level they remain unchanged. Now even the middle class wants maids since both husband and wife might be going out for work. But unfortunately, if the employers are from the upper caste, they might not even let them into their kitchens. Even fear of prosecution does not push the employers to accept them. We also have child labour squads that have saved children who the employers say are a part of their family. A great deal of community sensitisation needs to be done. We go and participate in awareness raising programmes.

According to me domestic work is a skilled job so there should be skill training on the one hand and regulation on the other. Special interventions will have to be designed to ensure this. Minimum wages can be enforced if we get complaints but nobody is willing to complain."

He shared the case of a domestic worker who had filed a case against her employer, Vinoda Reddy. She worked as a maid for about 16 to 17 years without any salary. The understanding was that she would be paid at the time of her marriage for which all the costs would be taken care of. However when the time came, she was paid a paltry amount of Rs. 50,000. When the case came to the department, they issued a notice and also told the domestic worker to file a case under the Minimum Wages Act. An ex parte order was passed about six months ago since the employer never responded. The total amount calculated as her dues came to Rs 16 lakhs that included penalty for non-payment. This is yet to be paid but we have filed for recovery.

A sensitive and proactive government representative can make the law work on behalf of those it is supposed to benefit.

The conversation ended with him saying that he pays his maid Rs 2,000 for 20 minutes of work. "By the time I go in for a bath and come out she has finished her work and is gone", he said laughing.

### 3.5 Advocacy: From the Grassroots to the Global

When MSI and other organisations began their struggle for domestic workers, there were absolutely no welfare measures in place. Now domestic workers actually come under the ambit of several laws including:

- The Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013
- Unorganised Sector Social Security Act, 2008
- Minimum Wages Act

The minimum wages for 8 hours of work everyday according to Government of Telangana has been fixed at Rs 6956. The Social Security Act 2008 was the first legislation that recognised domestic work as labour since the house is not recognised as a work place. A PIL had to be filed to include the home as a work place as part of the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, which did not include it earlier.

2010 was a turning point in the movement since ILO took up discussion on domestic work and NDWM played a major role in exerting international pressure. The ILO Secretariat first documented the situation of domestic workers all over the world including their legal status if any and came out with a Brown Report. In 2010, GOI constituted a Task Force on Domestic Work of which Br. Varghese was also a member. The task was to respond to ILO questionnaire and gather information.

“We sent our report to the Ministry and it changed only two words. We had said “We need a Convention” and they said “We don’t need a Convention”. The rationale was that the India situation is different since domestic workers are part of the ‘family’.”

– Br. Varghese

At the ILO therefore when a motion was moved as to whether we needed a convention, India responded with a “No” betraying its highly regressive mindset towards a largely feminised workforce working within the

“sacred” confines of the family and domestic sphere. India lost and found itself in the honoured company of countries with abysmal human rights records like Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh.

The groups including MSI that were in this international meeting returned and started lobbying with the premise that it was unacceptable that India takes this stand. In 2011, Brown became Blue Report and was presented again. Thanks to effecting lobbying with the NAC and Sonia Gandhi, the government's stand changed. The ILO Convention 189 adopted in 2011 has been signed by India but it has yet to be ratified by bringing its own domestic laws in conformity with the Convention.

At that time the focus was on formulating a policy at the national level, which was ready by 2013. But Sharad Pawar scuttled it at the level of the Cabinet itself saying that “families will be destroyed.” On both occasions, one international and the other national, India showed how women's labour and role in families whether as domestic worker or wife/mother/daughter is still held hostage to highly patriarchal notions of power and control. NDA threw it out totally and came out with a new draft.

“The stand of groups like MSI is that what is needed is a Law and not a Policy. But now even the Law is under threat from the proposed labour codes, which almost all unions are rejecting stating that these will weaken and water down all the major gains of the labour movements. The Labour Commissioner is having consultations on the Social Security Code that the central unions are boycotting saying that our presence will endorse the inevitable outcome.

Shashi Tharoor has introduced the Bill prepared by the NDWM as a private member's Bill and the CPM has done too in June 2017. “

**– Br. Varghese**

The NDWM was part of organising a massive rally of almost 10,000 domestic workers who gathered in Delhi on August 2, 2018 to ask for a comprehensive legislation and the withdrawal of labour codes.

A memorandum with 10,000 signatures was handed over to the PM's office, Labour Ministry, Standing Committee on Labour and all opposition parties including the Congress and CPM.

### 3.5.1 Strengthening Grassroots Connect to Global Advocacy

The strength of the work of MSI with advocacy is that it attempts to link it to local work. As for instance on June 16, which is international domestic workers day, none of the workers go to work. As part of this, smaller actions are also undertaken like meeting local leaders, labour commissioners, etc. with their major demands that revolve around:

- Minimum wages
- Weekly holiday
- Social security
- Ratification of ILO Convention 189
- Housing for all domestic workers
- Setting up of local committees under the Sexual Harassment Act

The minimum wages that have been set by central trade unions is now Rs 15,000 and Rs 10,000 is being demanded for domestic workers.

However, these efforts need to be strengthened and integrated into the processes of the union if the latter has to grow in its influence and reach both locally and nationally.

#### Networks

The networks that MSI is part of include:

**State:** Domestic Workers Federation India initiated by MSI

**National:** National Platform for Domestic Workers that has other independent members like SEWA and Workers Charter

**International:** International Domestic Workers Federation, ILO



International pressure becomes important in context where the national governments are not listening. International lobbying/naming and shaming then becomes important. Therefore, MSI as part of the NDWM is part of the International Domestic Workers Federation that unions are linked with. The National Platform is a more loose federation of registered unions.

### **3.6 Challenges**

While it is clear that the vision of advocacy and the processes and structure of unionisation are strong and impactful, for long term sustainability it is important to strengthen the community networking that provides the link between the two. For while there is great clarity that community mobilisation provides a strong foundation for the union, the activists and partner organisations of MSI need to evolve a common sense of history and political perspective that underlies one of the oldest, effective and sustained advocacy initiatives on domestic work. This coupled with a more comprehensive, rooted and long term plan for skill training would ensure the independence and autonomy of the trade union that could build on the institutional support provided by MSI.

## Chapter IV

# **Rural Literacy Health Project: A Case Study on Domestic Workers and Life Skill Training**

Rural Literacy Health Project (RLHP) based in Mysore is a classic development organisation of the mid-eighties working in eight backward districts with an integrated and rights based approach to development. Working in close collaboration and rare confrontation with the government, the focus is on child and youth development, women's empowerment along with health and sanitation programmes. They are working in 60 slums in and around Mysore, in 132 villages and have now extended their work to north Karnataka. As was the primary strategy of most large NGOs of that time, the model that was followed was project based with the formation of CBOs in every community along with women's groups that subsequently came together to form the strong and empowered Dhwani Federation which in turn has become the base for the domestic workers union. In this case study, while tracing the contours of this empowerment model, the focus will be on the work, reach and impact of the Mysore Gruha Karmikara Trade Union that is seen through its life skills programme which appears to be the core and most impactful aspect of this initiative. However, there must be some reflection on whether these life skills are oriented towards making the women to fit into existing gender and class roles even while undoubtedly increasing their self-worth and widening their skill sets. And whether this strength could in turn enable their growth as an independent union with an identity of its own and that which is not so much project driven as much as it is sustained by its empowered membership, political perspective and processes.

## **4.1 Empowerment, Dignity of Labour, Life Skill Training: The Foundations of the Union**

RLHP's long years of work in the slums in terms of organising the slum dwellers for their basic rights and dignity forms the foundation for the union of domestic workers that is now slowly being built and strengthened. Dhvani Mahila Okkoota and the Slum Dweller Federation are the two pillars of this work that has organised the women and the slum dwellers around their basic rights. Dhvani has grown into a very strong network of women who are very well aware of not only their rights but also that of slum dwellers as also the different categories of workers who live there including the constructions workers, the pourakarmikas and the domestic workers. There is an awareness that the rights of all are inter related and the battles with the state vis-a-vis their rights have to be coordinated. This they have done in a very systematic and programmatic way by acting as a bridge between the community and the government. One of their "Best Practices" that symbolise this approach is perhaps the "Mass Contact" programme through which, after a lot of ground work is done in terms of survey and pre meeting advocacy, they bring government officials to the different areas where they work and present in public the primary demands of the community. The women's empowerment programme started in 1984 at a time when women were rarely allowed to come out and attend the public programmes organised by RLHP. There was a case then when the men leaders of that time came on to the stage where women were sitting and pulled and dragged them out by their hair! In 2002, the federation slowly started addressing issues of domestic violence against women through taking up individual cases and gradually the community itself grew to start addressing the issue by coming together to prevent a husband from beating up his wife.

### **Shobha, PK Sanatorium Slum**

The very articulate, bright and smartly dressed Shobha is the voice of Dhvani having been part of it for the last 25 years. She traces her own growth and the growth of the organisation.

In Mysore, Mandya, Chamrajnagar there are 56 slums. Here there are about 10,000 women who are part of the Dhvani mahila

sangha. Social perception about us is that all slum dwellers are dirty, unclean, robbers and thieves. We had no respect from the government either. RLHP started coming into our slums and made persistent efforts to draw us out. Initially we were not bothered about them. We were only worried about our husband, children, our house and our livelihood. But they did not give up and kept calling us for meetings to the anganwadi that we slowly started attending. They told us not to restrict ourselves within the four walls of the house and to start coming out and be recognised as women with our own rights and dignity. We were repeatedly exposed to many new issues that made us understand ourselves and society more. We got trainings on gender, laws, how we should change...at least three times a month. Focus was that women should come out socially and politically. Women should also be part of panchayats, should be part of public meetings, should be part of resolving domestic disputes, also become pujaris...why should we be pujaris only in our own house. RLHP through setting up Dhvani mahila sangha of which we all became members strengthened us to deal with our problems at home, in the community and society. All this helped us to get more confidence and courage.

Earlier any time there was a theft, even in Bangalore, just because there was this reputation that our slum had robbers, the police would first come here and pick up our men. One such time the police came into our slum with a dog and started pushing their way into our homes. They went into the house of a man who had brought fish, cooked it, drank well and had gone to sleep around 3 p.m. The poor man was a TB patient. The police beat him up and dragged him to the station. Around 150 of us came together as a group and went to the police station and protested saying that we are also human beings and not animals to be dragged away like this. We told them that henceforth if there was any problem they should approach us as an organisation and take permission to come into our area. Now we have even put up a board outside our



slum as the Dhwani Mahila Okkoota and people know that people living here are also intelligent and aware of their rights.

I have been part of Dhwani Mahila Okkoota for the past 25 years. We have a meeting in the Jyothinagar slum every month and people from different slums come to us with their problems related either to their personal/ domestic issues or lack of some amenities in their slum and we take it up as an issue and try to resolve it. There are about 10 to 15 key leaders who visit the slums every month.

### **Lakshmi, Madivaana**

Lakshmi's story perhaps is similar to that of most domestic workers. Living in slums where there is daily fear of being evicted and rendered without a home; devaluing themselves and their labour thanks to employers who diminish their personhood and their worth. The extensive reach of RLHP and the collective power of the union have perhaps rectified this to some extent. In that they have been able to get more permanent housing despite being mercilessly evicted and thrown out of the city that uses and discards them. In that they have been given a higher sense of self-worth and dignity. And in that they are beginning to value themselves and their labour in more human and just ways, and forcing the community around also to do so. While it is tragic that they feel so overwhelmed with even the smallest humane gesture that their employers display despite the fact that they might be exploiting them emotionally and economically, it is encouraging that they are speaking up for their rights and dignity.

Earlier we lived in Madivaana. I have worked in a house for 20 years and I still get a salary of Rs 300 to wash clothes and sweep and swab. In another house where I only sweep and swab I get Rs 200. I work for half an hour. In two other houses I get 1,500 and they look after me as a member of the family. They leave the house

to me and go. There I work from 6 to 8 and in the other house from 8 to 9. I lived in Madivaana, Mysore.

I lived in a slum. We used to stay in a hut and mine was the first house to be demolished when the bull-dozers came. It was a second Saturday and early morning. My son was still small and he was sleeping. I went out to put water outside the door and saw the bull-dozers and I wondered what they were doing here. Frightened, I ran into the house and picked up my son and ran out. They mercilessly demolished my house with everything in it. Then they put me into a jeep and took me away. RLHP really came to our help at that time. We got together to organise a protest. This bore fruit and we were all allotted houses in Agrahara. It is very far from where I come to work. The bus fare itself is Rs 30 for each day. The monthly pass that costs Rs 620 per month helps. We live in Muniswaminagar.

Earlier we used to come to work just as we were dressed when we got up. Now, after the training and since we have to come by bus we also dress more neatly. Where I used to work the employer used to scold me affectionately – why do you come like this? Comb your hair, dress neatly and come. They look after me like a member of the house.

It was the case of Manjula, a member of the women's group in Muneshwarnagar that woke RLHP and Dhvani to the fact that most women from slums, i.e. almost 70 per cent were engaged in domestic work and at that time most were going for cleaning toilets. Manjula was a domestic worker who was sexually and physically assaulted by the employer's son. The Dhvani women were informed after she was admitted to a hospital in a serious state with heavy bleeding. When they went to see her, they saw that the management was trying to hush the case up. They forced the owners to shift Manjula to a better hospital. On enquiries it was revealed that the employer's son had tried to rape her when she was sweeping and when she resisted, he had hit her on

the head. Finally, when the federation women went to the police station where they tried to lodge a case, the owners brought evidence to state that the son was mentally challenged. Finally, a compensation of Rs 60,000 was paid to cover her medical costs and to take care of her expenditure as she was unable to go for work.

After dealing with Manjula's case they realised that this issue needed to be addressed in a more serious and systematic way through awareness raising and constant trainings. At that time the discrimination was also stark in terms of not allowing them to come into the kitchens, giving them tea in separate glasses, etc. This was not seen so much as an issue of "labour" rights and the fact that they are part of the unorganised sector but more as increasing the bargaining power of women and enabling them to enhance their self worth and dignity through improving personal hygiene including having a bath and going neatly dressed for work and being conscious of the dignity of their labour. This would ensure that the employers do not use them only to "clean" their toilets etc.

"That was when we also started life skill training for domestic workers. The reason was that after around 2006 we started getting queries about whether there was anybody who could come for full-time work like taking care of children, the elderly, etc. While the women we were working with who lived in the slums knew basic sweeping, swabbing, etc; they did not know how to use more sophisticated home appliances, patient care, etc which is when we realised the importance of skill improvement and so started life skill training and not so much skill training. This included awareness on issues related to gender, leadership, how to prevent yourself from being exploited and assert yourself at your workplace and not devalue and degrade yourself. They also learnt how to use home appliances like the mixer-grinder, washing machine, ironing, how to attend to phone calls, making beds, how to use bed pans, etc. We made a curriculum for one month and started life skill training. We got support that time from the KUDFC and trained about

three batches. When we saw change happening in terms of the increasing confidence levels of the women, improvement in their skills and their bargaining power we included life skill training as part of the women's empowerment programme in Dhwani. After they got their certificates, they started taking up jobs on their own. And so we got the opportunity in 2014/2015 to start focussed work with the domestic workers in terms of unionising them that fitted into our ongoing work of empowering domestic workers as part of Dhwani."

**Saraswathi, RLHP**

## **4.2 Building the Union**

### **4.2.1 Process, Challenges and Future Plans**

The actual focus on building a union and gradual awareness that the women are also labour and therefore shifting the focus from only personal empowerment and dignity to structural issues like workplace exploitation, low wages, casteism and discrimination, health issues came in with the EC-PIE project. Other issues from this base came with the EC-PIE project. Focussing on three districts – Mysore, Mandya and Chamrajnagar the structure slowly evolved through the following process:

- Baseline survey in targeted areas of Mysore, Mandya and Chamrajnagar in which about 1200 women were reached out to.
- Rapport building through door to door visits
- Building up of 74 groups comprising about 10 to 15 women each who were trained at different levels including empowerment, skill generation, socio economic rights, accessing government entitlements, dealing with exploitation of women, health, child development, etc
- As a result of this about 1,361 women have been reached out to and have benefitted from the trainings workshops.



As a result of all this four federations (from Mysore, Chamrajnagar, Srirangapatna and Nanjangud) have come together to form the Mysore Gruha Karmikara Trade Union that was registered in 2016. There are smaller executive bodies of 10 to 15 women that take decisions on their own to ensure decentralisation. All of them meet on their own to address local issues but come together every three months. In case of serious issues taking place, solidarity is extended from the central union.

Since RLHP is working in slums where there are also rag-pickers, pourakarmikas, tailors, etc and this is a rights based approach, the attempt is also to bring all of them together as the unorganised sector and organise common programmes like that on international women's day. The union members met with government officials and apprised them with the situation and also provided widespread awareness about the worker facilitation centres. Advocacy for this is being done through mobilising the different unorganised sectors to prevail upon the labour department to set up the centres, whose creation is provided for under the Act.

The objective is to prevail upon the labour department to set up the centre in Mysore at least. As part of this, union leaders have even gone to Bangalore to complain about the non-existence of such centres.

In group discussions the following challenges were shared as those that emerged in the process of building the union:

- One of the primary challenges was for women to even come together for meetings. Husbands would react with violence, employers would get upset, timings were not convenient since they would be free only in the evenings and even those who went for work in the evening were not available. Cynical questions were asked about "what will we get out of it?"
- The other challenge came from changing mind-sets of employers for which a lot of work had to be done with them.
- Government departments have no clarity about what kind of schemes are available and there has been delayed response in terms of responding to applications for smart cards, etc.

- In semi urban areas there is a lot of disparity in wages. The labour department too has specified differential wages in different zones like semi urban, rural and urban areas. In some areas the salaries are very high.
- While women are also negotiating wages at piece rate like charging per cloth for washing, etc. this is easier in places like Mysore but difficult in places like Nanjangud and Srirangapatna. This is because the relationships in these places are still caste-based, feudal and emotional. The workers feel their employers are doing them a favour by even coming for their meetings! Apart from being gendered, the relationship between the employer and employee is almost infantilised.
- There was a consensus that the union has to bring women together to negotiate for their wages and if the employers don't agree, then all must come together to boycott the employer. That is the only way attitudes will change.

Despite all these challenges it is clear that domestic workers have been motivated to become leaders. Sub unions have been formed in the districts and membership has been strengthened. A membership fee of Rs 50 is charged. Apart from the union, the women on their own initiative have decided to form self-help groups to foster saving. The leaders along with women from the Dhvani federation also address issue of domestic violence and other issues related to women.

The future plans for the union include:

- Issuing of identity cards to union members
- Pressurising the government to start workers facilitation centres
- Start a placement agency that will also be a skill training agency through the union to ensure its economic sustainability
- Sustain the running of the union independently to ensure minimum wages and social security benefits

### **Chandramma, Secretary, Union**

I have been doing domestic work for the past 15 years and also used to do some tailoring at home. It was through my children who were studying in the government school that RLHP identified us as domestic workers and started reaching out to us and prepared us to the point where we are now!

I knew nothing about a union and what it was supposed to do. We began by organising ourselves into groups which then came together to form a trade union that was recognised by the labour department and through this we were given training. Yes, although RLHP played a central role in bringing us together, we are confident that we can take this forward on our own. Being together in a group empowered us, gave us more knowledge about the law, about our rights even to form a union. We had to struggle so much to even get our registration – the number of strikes we had to do to get this recognition! We did so many jaathas to bring about awareness among society, reach out to the employers whose support also we sought. They are also much more aware and open to our demands and even willing to engage with us.

My own employer has changed so much now. I also got the courage to speak up and asked for what I thought was fair for me. Earlier she was paying me Rs 1,500 and never gave any holidays. We also realise that we can not ask for everything in one go. When I asked her for four days' leave in a month, she said alright take two days now and let us see after sometime. Now because of the union and the training, we have also learnt to go for work more neatly dressed and so the employers have also started respecting us more. They are letting us into spaces that we were not allowed into earlier. We have picked up more skills like ironing, using the washing machine, separating clothes when we wash and knowing which one to dry in the shade and which in the sun, etc. This is why our salaries have also increased. In the new house I am working in I

get paid Rs 3,000 now since I have also begun to cook. I work from 7.30 to 10.00. In the earlier house where I have been working for the last 15 years, I get Rs 1,500. My salary has not increased since I only do one job, i.e. sweeping and swabbing.

### **Bhagyamma, Paschim Vahini**

For the past three years I feel that the union has become like my own mother's house – in fact even better. The kind of information and support we get here is incredible. What more would a woman want. We sit like sisters and talk to each other. We are so burdened with so many money problems at home that we even feel like dying...but I feel so strengthened here. Apart from domestic work I also sell tender coconuts. I have become strong and confident after coming here.

## **4.2.2 Employer Sensitisation**

Post the mid-term review of the project, the focus, apart from mobilising the women around their rights, also shifted to employer sensitisation. As part of this two programmes have been held in Mysore and Chamrajnagar in which about 50 employees participated. The purpose was to expose them to the rights of the domestic workers in terms of their minimum wages, weekly off, etc. Since it was a big challenge even to bring them for the meeting, a way was found through the domestic workers themselves calling their own employers either through a formal letter from the union or through motivating and convincing them directly. The approach has been to say that their support is needed to get their rights as any other worker from the informal sector – something they are more amenable to rather than directly asking them to change their attitudes!

The Mysore meeting that was held shortly after the union was registered was strategically planned since it was also used as the occasion on which 30 members would be formally given their membership cards. Along with the employers, government representatives and the media



were also present. This way it would not only become a public issue but the employers would also be aware that a union had been formed.

Some of the employers accepted the positive role that domestic workers have played and others became quite defensive. But other issues like leave and minimum wages came up that were also countered by them. They also did not accept that they did not give respect to the domestic workers. However, while they were not ready to change from within, they were all ready to extend support to the demands that the union wanted to make to the government! Some complaints were heard about the erratic timings of the domestic workers and their taking frequent leave. Minimum wages were discussed and the employers said, “How can we pay so much...you also have to see the size of the house and the hours and quantum of work, etc.”

**Ravindranath, RLHP**

### **Interview with Employer Babu Alex and Domestic Worker Aarthi, Kalyangiri**

*A retired customs officer, Babu Alex is the picture of a “decent” middle class urbanite, who has retired either from the government or private service, has children in the US, travels out of the country pretty often, has open and progressive views on domestic workers, is fairly liberal but retains a chronic suspicion and an inability to totally trust “that class”.*

He was all praise for the work of Aarthi who he finds quiet and efficient. “She quietly comes and does her work and I pay her Rs 1,500 for the sweeping, swabbing, washing of clothes and vessels. Yes, I agree that domestic workers need minimum wages. Look how it is in the West. The workers are so good and professional. They even travel to work in their own car and are so very efficient. I trust Aarthi totally. We had left the whole house to her for 4 months.”

He has equal contempt for the Communists and the Church that he believes have become rich, arrogant and too complacent. And he is equally cynical about the rich and the poor.

As a parting shot after all the good things he said about Aarthi he says, “She is very good but I don’t like it that she lies. See when we had gone away she used to come and water the garden and clean the house. Our neighbour one day called and said that the tap outside had been left open and water was leaking. And when we asked her she denied it. This is what I don’t like!”

We go to Aarthi’s house which was a revelation! She lives in a tiny slum board house that has a hall cum kitchen with a working room under construction on the top floor. It is home not only to Aarthi, her husband Shanmugha and their two children but a nephew and niece they have adopted after the untimely death of their parents. This one room house is equipped with all that a modern house needs – fridge, washing machine, TV. A photo with her, Shanmugha, a carpenter and artist gifting Thalaiva with a painting of him dominates the room. It makes us curious but first we need to finish talking to Aarthi.

She works in one more house of a doctor apart from that of Valsa and Babu Alex where she earns an additional Rs 2,000. Following the training that she underwent through RLHP she has taken on an additional job as a cook in a hospital where she works from 12 noon to 6 p.m. and earns Rs 7,600. She is more articulate and voluble in her own house unlike the quiet demeanour she showed at her employer’s!

“I share everything with my employers. As soon as I heard about the policy on leave and minimum wages I went and told my employers and took my leave. They even increased my salary from Rs 1,000 to Rs 1,500. And this was only after I asked them. I take leave whenever needed especially when I need to go on trips with

my family. And my employer jokes and tells me that he thought they travel a lot but that I travel even more! ”

Before we leave we go upstairs which is Shanmugha’s workspace and are stunned with the art works he is creating with the help of his nephews and brother. Little chips of wood are being meticulously cut and assembled together with great skill and crafted into magnificent paintings that are then sold to big shops including Kavary Arts and Crafts which in turn sells them to art aficionados for perhaps four or five times the price it fetches for artists like Shanmugha.

### **4.2.3 Advocacy with Government**

The RLHP it is obvious has worked in effective coordination with the labour department and the advocacy has had a positive impact. In the meeting with the current assistant labour commissioner, he seemed very cooperative and understanding of the nature of domestic work as different compared to other forms of unorganised work including construction, rag pickers, etc. all of who have identifiable employers and public work spaces. He also accepted that the labour department needs to be more proactive in making public the fact that the government recognises domestic work as work and has brought it into the schedule of unorganised labour with minimum wages and other working conditions that give it the dignity and value it currently lacks in public perception if not the law. Although being cautious, he has taken steps to issue smart cards as per the government order to legally confirm their status such that they can get the necessary social security benefits. He also accepted that they need to take more proactive steps in putting a workers’ facilitation centre in place.

“Under the Unorganised Sector Social Security Act 2008, the Unorganised Sector Social Security Board has been formed which specifies 83 different forms of employment of which domestic work is one. There registrations have now started. In our department we recognise that RLHP has pioneered the registration of a union.

Twice they have had public meetings that I was also part of where the focus has been to get whatever are their rights as social security. The first step has been to register smart cards. The objective of this is to recognise them legally as workers. Through this the various social benefits can be directly facilitated. This is just at the beginning stage. We want to finish the registration of workers within 2018-2019. No smart cards have been issued yet in any part of the state. We are in the process of distributing application forms to reliable organisations like RLHP so that they can identify genuine workers and send in their applications, which we have started sending to the head office in Bangalore. It is challenging to both bring the domestic workers together and monitor minimum wages and to assess the employer- employee relationship. Particularly since the work place is different from places like factories and industries where there is one identifiable employer with several employees under him/her. Complaints will need to be filed through the union on behalf of the workers or they can do it directly. We have not received any complaints from them so far. Wherever workers are getting salaries as low as Rs 200 and Rs 300, please bring them here. We can then take it up. Media attention should be brought to this issue.”

– **Thamanna,**  
**Assistant Labour Commissioner**

### **4.3 Life Skills and Leadership Training**

Listening to the women from Dhvani, from the union and community members, it is clear that one of the strongest features of the union has been its work with skill training. The life skill training programme that RLHP has been doing for the past many years with women in the slums has now been adapted to the life situation of the domestic workers with a great degree of success as gathered by the accounts of the union members we conversed with from the three different taluks that they are located in.



The life skill training for domestic workers through which 260 women have been trained so far is a 20 day module that is very intense and very transformative and has helped the workers both personally and professionally. Diverse resource people are called to talk about a range of issues from gender, health, nutrition, labour rights and various government schemes along with skill training in cooking, ironing and housekeeping apart from on-the-job training in Green Hotel.

It is a certificate programme with the certificates being distributed in public programmes in the presence of government officials and the media such that it gets wide publicity enhancing public awareness.

Some of the specific impacts achieved include:

1. Enhancement of self-image, self-worth and self confidence that has resulted in them challenging class and caste hierarchies in their own ways.
2. Learning of new skills and broadening of the range of their expertise leading to either increase in income in the houses they work or in taking up additional skilled jobs like caring for the elderly, etc. in homes and old-age homes or working in hospitals.
3. Some have even set up their own independent businesses like setting up stalls selling chaat, idli vada, pakoda, etc.
4. Learning to handle and maintain domestic appliances in their own homes too that has even led to the prevention of some disasters like the bursting of gas cylinder.
5. Increased bargaining capacity that has led to them negotiating for higher wages with their employers.
6. Economic empowerment also through additional businesses that RLHP has been supporting like selling tender coconuts or milk and curd.

### **Gowramma, Chamrajnagar**

I used to go and do domestic work in somebody's house the same way that I did in mine. But the salary I got was just not enough.

I was getting just Rs 700. After we organised ourselves into a group, we got skill training for 20 days at the end of which we got a certificate. When I showed this certificate in a pappad factory, I got a job there. Now I do domestic work from 8 to 9 in the mornings for which I get about Rs 700 for washing vessels and sweeping and swabbing the house. So this has benefitted me greatly. Then I go to work in the factory from 10 to 5 in the evening for which I get Rs 6,000 per month.

### **Lakshmi, Kalyangiri**

I first took training 15 years ago. On account of the skills I had acquired, I started working in a hospital in the housekeeping department. Now I also do domestic work in two houses. I leave home at 8 am and return at 8 in the night. I have three children and hope to make a bright future for them. I earn Rs 6,000 in the hospital along with PF, ESI, etc. I get Rs 1,200 from each house.

### **Shilpa, Mysore**

I was earlier doing only domestic work and earned Rs 2,500. Now after my training, my employer has also hired me to do cooking in her house and also work in her clinic. I work from 8 to 10 in the morning in the house and then from 10 to 2 in the clinic. She drops me home in the afternoons and I go back and work from 4 to 7 again in the clinic. For this I get paid Rs 10,000.

### **Chandramma, Mysore**

After the 20 days' life skill training I was placed in a PG where I was supposed to help the cook who was a Lingayat. She would keep telling me not to touch this or that. If I cut vegetables she would wash and use them. I used to wonder why. Once I took the mop and deliberately went into the kitchen. She asked me why I was coming in and told me to stay out. I asked her why she was behaving like

this with me. “I have told you and you must do as I say!” was her only response. I did not like this and I came here and told Madam that I don’t want to continue working there. And when the cook was asked why she behaved rudely with me, she denied everything and also asked that I go back there to work. I refused. I also told them why I was leaving. The children at the PG were all from my caste. They came to my defence and asked that woman why she was not letting me go inside but she told them to go away and not interfere. They also did not have the courage to stand up to her. After leaving the PG, I started working in the house of a doctor as a cook.

Earlier I never used to tell my husband that I go for domestic work. Now I have no problem.

Now we have learnt much. We don’t accept old food that they give us as by the time we bring it home, it gets spoilt!

## **4.4 Srirangapatna: A Case Study**

It was insightful to plot some of these changes in a town like Srirangapatna where the union members had just completed a 21 day programme in the month of August. The discussions revealed not only their perception of the impact the trainings have had on their work and personal lives in terms of enhancement of salaries and more equitable relationship with their employers but also the context within which domestic work is happening in this town.

Srirangapatna is a temple town dominated by Brahmins whose primary occupation is conducting the death-related ceremonies since almost all the Hindu communities who cremate, come here to immerse the ashes of the departed. It is also a tourist centre. The domestic workers are by and large the dominant agricultural caste of Gowdas. The caste system is highly visible and well entrenched in this space where ritual purity is practiced at its best and discrimination is not only social but also economic. Domestic workers are kept out of inner spaces including the

kitchen and the puja room, the vessels they wash are rewashed with tamarind water as are the vegetables that they cut. The salaries are ridiculously low coming down to as much as Rs 400 per month that is paid for 2 hours of work everyday. When asked why they accept such low salaries Ratnamma, the Secretary of the Srirangapatna unit says, "On the one hand the employers here are quite poor so they cannot give us more. On the other hand, sentiment is the only obstacle to us not asking for more salary."

This reveals the very intimate and nuanced ongoing engagement between an increasingly aware class of devalued workers with a dominant caste that while sitting on top of the social hierarchy in this town has slid to the bottom of the class hierarchy within the community. This awareness of their own strength and the vulnerability of their employees is helping them subvert and challenge the feudal relationship of interdependency through which they have been emotionally and socially blackmailed into accepting exploitation as their lot in life. There is almost an amused pity on their part for an older generation of Brahmins who are not only poor but visibly anachronistic in these changing times with their extreme and discriminatory notions of purity. Thanks, in no small measure, to the union that is giving them dignity, identity, awareness, confidence and courage, changes are being pushed by the domestic workers who are becoming more assertive. In this context the life skill trainings have been central to catalysing many of these changes. Some excerpts from the conversation with the women that were very revealing in terms of the changes that are slowly but surely creeping in.

### **Padmavathy**

I am working in two houses where I am getting paid Rs 800. I don't do any of the inside work; only the outside work of cleaning vessels and washing clothes. They don't let me work in the house since they are Brahmins and do their own work. If I do work inside then they pay me extra. Most Brahmins don't let us into the kitchens at all and also the deity room. "When they want they will let us in anywhere. When they don't, they will not allow us anywhere."



When we wash their vessels, they wash it again with tamarind water. The older ones tell us “We are old timers *mundede* (a perjorative/semi affectionate term that denotes widowhood) don’t do like that... you don’t understand *madi* (ritual purity).” Now not many are like that. They also have changed. Now the younger generation has no such problem. They are happy if somebody comes and works in the house. If the older generation and in-laws are not at home, they will even get the cooking done by us! But the older generation will not change!

## **Padma**

I work in four houses. Earlier we felt that the work we did was demeaning. I would not even tell others that I am doing domestic work since I felt ashamed and wondered what people would think of me. Now after the training I feel so much more confident. There is nothing wrong in what I am doing. The employers have a need for help and we have a need for money that will help us to survive.

I also learnt a lot about society, about the nature of our work and our rights. Earlier, we did nothing more than go to work, come back, cook, eat, watch TV, etc. But now I have realised that we do need to come together to fight for our rights and dignity. When we have problems we also need somebody to go to. Just like the way construction workers and other workers have theirs. I feel like my eyes have opened to a wider reality. I have even learnt to argue with my employers. I told them “you will never think about me when I fall ill and even when I am dying but when you fall ill, you expect me to come and look after you. How fair is that?” I told them that I learnt all this at the meetings that I am attending. They told me “Oh you have learnt all this and are now coming and threatening us with all that you know!” So now they are quite open to all that I say and my questions! They have even helped me with my daughter’s wedding. I have been working in two houses for 23 years. My

daughter was in the 5th standard when I started working there and now she got married. In one house they give me Rs 1,500 and in the other Rs 400. Both places I do sweeping, swabbing, washing of clothes and cleaning of vessels. Where they are giving me Rs 400 I have argued a lot with them to pay me more and now they have assured me that they will increase my salary. When I first started they were giving me Rs 30. They are purohiths. I only put up with them because they have really helped me out when I was in great difficulty. My husband was an alcoholic and some days there was no food in the house and we used to go hungry. It was at that time that they stood with me and even helped me educate my children. It is with that “neeyath” that I help them.

The others run an udupi hotel. In both houses whenever there is extra work and they have extra cooking, or “parties” come to do thithi, etc., then they pay me extra Rs 100 or Rs 200. For the last two years I have been working in two more houses.

### **Bhagyamma**

I work in two houses. In one of the houses they used to earlier give me Rs 300. I told them it was not enough for the work I did and later they increased my salary to Rs 800. They appreciate the work that I do. After learning new things in the training I started doing extra work like folding clothes, etc when they asked me since the old lady could not do it herself. She and her children are happy with me and have asked me to continue and have increased my salary. In the other house they used to give me Rs 300 and later increased it to Rs 600. I told them again that this is not enough and subsequently they increased it to Rs 900.

After the training, my photo had appeared in the papers that my employer’s children saw in Bangalore. Her son saw it and took a cutting and sent it here. They were very happy that I was doing

such good things. But they were also worried that I would leave. They asked me if I would leave and go elsewhere. I said no, I will stay here and so they were very happy.

## **4.5 Green Hotel Collaboration**

The twenty-year-old fruitful collaboration between RLHP and the Green Hotel has perhaps been quite central to the success and impact of their skill training programme for domestic workers.

Green Hotel is a unique enterprise in the city of Mysore in that from its very inception, it was conceived of not only as a profit making venture but as one that will invest much of these profits back to issues related to environment, charity and social justice. A historical piece of property that was once a heritage house turned famous studio, in 1992 it was turned into a high end eco-friendly hotel on the board of which are individuals who have had long term involvement with issues related to development and tribal rights. It was perhaps only appropriate that RLHP and the board of the Hotel evolved this mutually beneficial partnership since 1997 that has worked at several levels:

1. The Green Hotel has been financially supporting students who have been part of Asha Ki Rana and Asha Bhavana, the homes for girls and boys from difficult circumstances including street children. Some of them have gone on to study engineering, law, nursing, etc. and are in very good positions in organisations like AIRTEL. And some even came back to work with RLHP, in the Child Helpline, etc.
2. Most members of the staff of Green Hotel have been recruited through RLHP including children of pourakarmikas, slum dwellers, widows, single women all of who have been employed in different capacities – waiters, housekeepers, cooks and managers of the coffee shop. Even though many may have left, they have grown and gone on to better positions.
3. They have helped RLHP in building toilets in slums where RLHP is working.

4. Training of domestic workers that started in 2002, has been more structured and regular since 2015. Seven batches have been trained so far and they have been given onsite practical training in all aspects of housekeeping at the hotel that has obviously helped many of the women we spoke to enhance their skills and approach their work more professionally. Some women from the training have been absorbed into the hotel.

## 4.6 Challenges

While undoubtedly the life skill training that includes skills enhancement as also individual empowerment has made an obvious impact as stated above, what needs to be reflected upon is the gender and class stereotyping that perhaps unconsciously gets reinforced while enhancing the immediate realities of domestic workers. What needs to be incorporated are perhaps the awareness and opportunities for greater mobility which could happen if the attempt of the focus is not only individual empowerment but collective enterprise. As for instance while the programme is increasing the confidence of the women, it is largely making them into confident housekeepers at best – be it within their own home or in their places of work. While it is important to bring in greater professionalisation of this sector that would reinforce dignity of labour and add greater value and worth to these services as in the West, other forms of skill training and entrepreneurial skills could help update and broaden their existing model to expand the work horizons of these women as also their notions of self-worth and dignity.





## Chapter V

# Reflections on the Engagement with Domestic Workers Across Seven States

In chapter one we dealt with the contextual understanding of the transition of the Indian workforce and the economy from formal to the informal within which the domestic work sector can be located. In the chapters two, three and four we tried to give a glimpse of the narratives showing the unique strength of each organisation and the emerging collectives. In this section we try to critically examine, understand and reflect on the interventions across all the interventions in the seven States.

### 5.1 Sectoral Understanding

On account of each of these organisations having diverse historical origins and priorities, it is clear that all do not share similar broader contextual understanding of this sector. While most organisations have had their beginnings in development work, it seems that there has not been any organic evolution to a rights-based approach rooted in a deeper understanding of the informal economy and unorganised labour that is central to this project. On account of this reason, it appears that the model of unionisation has been adopted by many primarily because it is a requirement of the project, which has resulted in a rather patchy approach to collectivisation and unionisation. While working with the informal economy and addressing the issues that emerge from it is also not new for organisations like Mahila Action, Montfort Social Institute (MSI) or even the Mysore based Rural Literacy Health Project (RLHP). It is only in exceptional cases like the Rajasthan Mahila Kamgar Union (Jaipur), and the Paschimbangla Griha Parichika Samiti (PGPS) which

directly support The Calcutta Samaritans (TCS), that one can see a deeper understanding of the broader political economy, unionising and a non-project approach to unionising. While one can see that a common understanding of this sector gradually emerges among the diverse organisations as a consequence of being involved in the project, the danger is that this political understanding will remain with the top functionaries while in functioning, it will continue to remain in project mode.

Mahila Action had been involved with issues related to women and children since 2012, but also started working with domestic workers for the EC-PIE project since 2015. Mahila Action began its work with domestic workers by organising collectives and later it enhanced its work in the other sectors with the collaboration of fish vendors, street vendors and construction workers. They were able to learn and build from the work already done and start the collectives. However, the action remained at the level of soft advocacy and partnership with the government.

The Centre for Child and Women Development (CCWD), Orissa, from 1993 has a comprehensive vision as an NGO that looks at workers as “beneficiaries” who come from economically weaker sections and are in need of development.

The two partner organisations, Institute of Social Research and Development (ISRID) and Centre for Integrated Development (CID) Bhopal region, have been working in a very comprehensive way with issues of children, education and livelihood. Their approach is a mix of benefits and rights.

A closer look at some of the organisations like Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union, MSI and RLHP shows the gradual deepening of common perspectives and approaches despite the fact that their starting points were different. The first has its roots firmly planted in labour politics; the second emerged from a Church based institutional framework while the third has evolved from the developmental approach of NGOs.

Harkesh Bugalia has a long history of being in the student union and subsequently trade union movement since the mid-eighties. He was in the student organisation AISA from 1986 to 1990 and was involved with the peasant movement too. He started work with the urban poor in 1994 and formed a union that was predominantly Bengali since most of the workers were migrants. The focus was on rehabilitating them through regularising the slum. He also worked with nomadic communities in 1998 and helped to rehabilitate about 2,250 families.

In 1996 he formed Rajasthan's first Construction workers' union, i.e. the Rajasthan Nirmaan Mazdoor Sanghathan, which is now called Rajasthan Evam General Mazdoor Union. They are also collaborating with 45 organisations from across the state called Dalit Alpasankhyat Daman Prathirodh Manch of the Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan. It is clear that the Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union has its genesis in a vibrant trade union movement that has fought for the rights to livelihood and dignity of all marginalised groups particularly the urban poor, labour and constructions workers. They are also connected with an International Shramik Solidarity Group that predates the Worker's Charter that the EC-PIE project has initiated. As Harkesh says "while our feet should be rooted in the local, thoughts should be global."

"This is the first time we are taking funding and we are learning a lot as part of this process. I did not understand anything about project maintenance for a whole year. But now it has helped us to collectivise and stabilise our ongoing work with the domestic workers as also initiate work in new areas like starting the workers facilitation centres and the Kachi Basthi Mahasangh. Our work has sustained not because it is project based but is invested in our slogan "power in people" and is ongoing in that direction. "

**– Harkesh Bugalia**



*From Chapter 2: The Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union: A Case Study in Collectivisation and Unionisation.*

MSI had a long history of work essentially with domestic workers. The movement that was built up nationally, focused only on domestic workers as the most vulnerable, but with a welfare and beneficiary approach. However, pushed by the rapid political and economic changes, MSI and other Church linked organisations have after a lot of self-reflection moved towards the formation of unions.

“MSI started in 2009. But 29 years ago in 1990, I started living in a slum. My basic focus was education. We began work in 27 schools before Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan came into being. We also worked with the youth. We then started working with adolescent girls. After this we looked at other forms of labour. A huge percentage of women were doing domestic work that was not recognised as a form of labour. No law or union recognised them. We started forming small groups of women who were domestic workers. All this was part of the People’s Initiative Network of which Sr. Lizzie was also a part. I then went away and came back in 2009 and started the Montford Social Institute and the core areas we focussed on were housing and domestic work. In 2011 ActionAid Association came in to support urban issues in a small way. The EC-PIE project came in 2014/15 and we took it up in 4 towns, i.e. Nalgonda, Wanarpathy, Guntur and Suryapet. There is a major decline in slum population in big cities.

The demography of the urban city is changing with privatisation and gated colonies that are exclusive spaces for the rich and middle class. There is no space for slums, which are being thrown out to the edges of cities. Apartments are being built under the JNURM for which there are no takers. The migration now is therefore into smaller towns that are showing an increase in slums. Situation of domestic work there is worse than in a city on account of persisting

feudal relations. The work with domestic workers intersects with the work with children and housing rights in the same slums since slums are the feeders of services to the cities and towns.”

– **Br. Varghese, MSI**

*From Chapter 3: Montford Training Institute: A Case Study on Advocacy in Domestic Work.*

The RLHP too has been working with women's rights issues and child issues since 1994, but it operates more through the social and development lens. Here, a very comprehensive NGO rights-based approach is visible in which all aspects of development work have been addressed and even if the informal economy was not being directly addressed, the base of a social movement was built up through setting up a strong women's federation.

RLHP based in Mysore is a classic development organisation of the mid eighties working in eight backward districts with an integrated and rights-based approach to development. Working in close collaboration and rare confrontation with the government, the focus is on child and youth development, women's empowerment along with health and sanitation programmes. They are working in 60 slums in and around Mysore, in 132 villages and have now extended their work to North Karnataka. As was the primary strategy of most large NGOs of that time, the model that was followed was project based with the formation of CBOs in every community along with women's groups that subsequently came together to form the strong Dhvani federation, which in turn has become the base for the domestic workers union.

“In Mysore, Mandya, Chamrajnagar there are 56 slums. Here there are about 10,000 women who are part of the Dhvani mahila sangha. Social perception about us is that all slum dweller are dirty, unclean, robbers and thieves. We had no respect from the government either. RLHP started coming into our slums and made

persistent efforts to draw us out. Initially we were not bothered about them. We were only worried about our husband, children, our house and our livelihood. But they did not give up and kept calling us for meetings to the anganwadi that we slowly started attending. They told us not to restrict ourselves to within the four walls of the house and to start coming out and be recognised as women who should come out from within your four walls and you must also be like others in society with your own rights and dignity. We were repeatedly exposed to many new issues that made us understand ourselves and society more. We got trainings on gender, laws, how we should change...at least three times a month. Focus was that women should come out socially and politically. Women should also be part of panchayats, should be part of public meetings, should be part of resolving domestic disputes; also become pujaris...why should we be pujaris only in our own house. RLHP through setting up Dhwani mahila sangha of which we all became members strengthened us to deal with our problems at home, in the community and society. All this helped us to get more confidence and courage.”

**-Shobha, PK**

**Sanatorium Slum, Domestic Worker and Union Leader**

*From Annexure III: RLHP: A Case Study on Domestic Workers and Skill Development Programme.*

## **Summary and Ways Forward**

The domestic work sector is defined by the ILO statement: “Work like no other, Work like any other.” The understanding of domestic work as work predetermines the kind of organisations set up.

A deeper analysis of organisations and their work practices including their larger contextual understanding reveals two diverse approaches to understanding domestic work and defining domestic workers which in

turn reflects in their organisational structures, as well as the linkages made for overall change and sustainability:

- a. as workers within the context of a changing and challenging political economy that would lead towards the unionisation approach. The two organisations in Jaipur and Hyderabad, i.e. Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union and the Montford Social Institute had therefore already begun the process of organising the women into unions even before the EC-PIE project to empower and enable them to get their rights and entitlements vis-a-vis the state and their employers. And they see the EC-PIE project as strengthening their ongoing work with unionising.
- b. as beneficiaries of development in an economy as a given, which would lead to putting into place social action groups or collectives that with the help of the NGO that supports them would only access entitlements from the government. Almost all the other organisations fell into this category. It is clear that it is only the EC-PIE project that pushed them towards unionisation since there was little understanding of productive forces and the economy within which the workers needed to be located. The work too therefore remains project focussed and would perhaps in most cases, wind up after completion of the project for lack of resources, if not planned for systematically. Of these however TCS Kolkata, and maybe Mahila Action as well as maybe the CWCD may link their members to a sustainable union in the state while RLHP is attempting to make their union self-sustainable even while it continues to be linked to the women's federation.

It is clear therefore that while the common theme in all the partner organisations remains that of collectivising and building leadership for empowerment, the goals and challenges remain different for the organisations. And that is largely because there is no shared understanding of the historical, social and gendered notions of domestic work as labour and not as "servants". What is usually not clear to many organisations, even those working with them, is that the domestic



workers are productive labourers who contribute to productivity; they enable the GDP to be generated and are part of the service industry.

Thus the primary task of all who work with them is visibilising the domestic worker, as well as her work as decent work. The next step towards visibility is collectivisation of them as workers and as women workers and organising them in self-sustaining unions. The need is to focus more on worker owned sustainability and lesser on project sustainability

## **5.2 Processes of Collectivisation and Unionisation**

“Collectivising domestic workers is no easy task, because of the fragmented nature of the work, the multiplicity of employers, and the dependence of domestic workers on their employers in times of crisis; as well as the time constraints on domestic workers” (Palriwala and Neetha 2009: 108). Participation in mobilisation activities is also difficult due to hours and nature of domestic work and the domestic workers’ social and political vulnerabilities along with the double burden of work and the almost blanket invisibility of live-in workers.

The focus of most groups mobilising domestic workers is to instil a worker consciousness and a sense of pride in domestic work, which involves a transition from perceptions of domestic work as “unskilled” to valuing domestic work as essential and necessary work. The need for a change in the perception of work is also related to the fact that the domestic worker works in the private and personal space of a home and family imbuing the relationship with ambiguity and emotion. In almost all the FGSs and interviews conducted with domestic workers in Indore, Jabalpur as well as in some meetings in Vizag, Hyderabad and Mysore most workers did not directly own up their identity as workers and also did not see their relationship with the employer with antagonism, even when there was exploitation or victimisation. Rather they perceived the relationship with gratitude. Many of them felt hesitant to negotiate even while devaluing themselves and their work.

“I have worked in a house for 20 years and I still get a salary of Rs 300 to wash clothes and sweep and swab. In another house where I only sweep and swab, I get Rs 200. I work for half an hour. In two other houses I get 1,500 and they look after me as a member of the family. They leave the house to me and go. Earlier, we used to come to work just as we were when we got up. Now after the training and since we have to come by bus, we also dress more neatly. Where I used to work the employer used to scold me affectionately – why do you come like this? Comb your hair, dress neatly and come. They look after me like a member of the house.”

– **Lakshmi,**  
**Domestic Worker, Mysore**

There is a lot of difference in the consciousness of workers, who from the beginning have been organised in a union mode, like in MSI Telangana, or Rajasthan Mahila Kamgar Union (RMKU) as compared to the other organisations into which this consciousness of being a worker is seeping in slowly. One notable difference that needs to be highlighted here is the example of Sampathi Devi from Jabalpur, full-time activist with ISRID who it is clear has brought in her own experience of being part of different movements including her own struggle against displacement of slums and as a woman leader in the basti. It must also be mentioned here that it is only the Rajasthan Mahila Kamgar Union, Jaipur that has adopted an inclusive approach and has raised the issues of transgender and their rights. Now in Rajasthan they have a third column for these persons in applications for various schemes.

“Before joining the Union, I thought that I was alone in my suffering. Now I realise that without collectivisation we could not fight for our rights. I have seen many changes with employers after the Union got formed. I was working in a house near the Hyderabad public school for two hours everyday. When I asked them for a weekly off, the employer got upset and said “If you don’t come then we will get somebody else.” I told them that we were part of a Union and

that nobody would come and work if I left. They then got scared and gave me what I had asked for. When I had a child, my husband stopped me from working. I gave the job to another girl and I am happy.”

**– Lavanya,  
President, GUTS**

*From Chapter 3: Montford Training Institute: A Case Study on Advocacy in Domestic Work.*

In the early years when I first joined the Union, in one of the colonies I worked a domestic worker was beaten up by her employer’s son when she had asked for higher payment. She was pregnant. A construction worker linked with the Union sent her to us. We came together in the area, had a meeting and lodged a case against the boy whose father was a Deputy Inspector of Police. He threatened all of us. But we remained strong. About 100 of us came together. Many of the employers who I had convinced were with us in our struggle in spirit if not physically. It was at that time that I developed the reputation of a “neta” in that area which I accepted since I did work hard to raise these issues. Subsequently the boy came and apologised and she also got compensation. The atmosphere has changed a lot since then.

**– Kamlesh Phadiya,  
Former President, RMKU, Jaipur**

Under the EC-PIE project, all the partner organisations have started the process of collectivisation, some separately with only the domestic workers, and some together with other informal sector workers. In the case of Mahila Action, while in the meetings, all the three sectors were present, it could be seen that the total number of domestic workers was very low. Overall also the union has only 500 members, despite the fact that they have been actively organising for long. The Jaipur partner has a direct membership into the union, and a separate domestic workers’

union, with 16,500 members. Those partner organisations, who have been rooted more in NGO building and development work of which women are a part display a lower degree of politicisation of their membership. This is primarily because their experience of collectivisation and union building is relatively more recent.

Project	Reach (no. of domestic workers during the project cycle)	Name of the registered union	No. of members enrolled in the union (during project cycle)	Year of union formation
Antakshari Foundation, Rajasthan	1500	Rajasthan Mahila Kamgaar Union	16500 (1500)	2008
Montfort Social Institute, Telangana	3760	Gruhakarmikula Union Telangana State & Domestic Workers Federation	2024	2017
Mahila Action, Andhra Pradesh	1235	Visakha Jilla Gruhakarmikula Union	426	2017
Rural Literacy & Health Programme, Karnataka	1468	Mysuru Gruha Karmikara Trade Union	657	2016
The Calcutta Samaritans, West Bengal	400	Paschimbanga Griha Paricharika Samiti	7000	2018
Centre for Child & Women Development, Odisha	578	Anasangathita Sramika Sangha, Odisha (Application submitted for trade union registration)	–	–
Centre for Integrated Development & Institute of Social Research & Development, Bhopal	–	Workers registered under domestic workers board in labour department; the collectives have planned to file the application for registration of union	542	–



## **Lakshmi Sarkar: Case Study from The Calcutta Samaritans, Kolkata**

Lakshmi Sarkar is a name that has the power to ignite thousands of domestic workers' minds for demanding their rights to dignity and decent work. Lakshmi being a domestic worker herself, had dealt with the problem of discrimination and stigma, and realised how difficult it was for domestic workers to get respect and recognition for their work. Domestic work in which million of women are engaged in India is still perceived as devalued work due to the historic feudalistic culture of the country. West Bengal, in spite of witnessing the strength of labour movement in the past, couldn't take any steps to regulate the work conditions and wages.

Lakshmi who started her life as an ordinary domestic worker who earned Rs. 3,500 per month became an active leader of the domestic workers' collective after attending a few meetings, which were organised by ActionAid Association and its implementing partner in her locality to mobilise and orient the workers about their rights. As she started attending meetings, she felt the need to find her own voice, to understand the underlying socio-political dynamics, denial of rights of informal labourers, more prominently of women workers who are engaged in the profession like hers. This led to her desire to work on the ground and make a difference.

She joined in the domestic workers' mobilisation campaign and started to organise small meetings beside the railway track of Dumdum station, in north Kolkata. But it wasn't easy to start with. She found it difficult to sensitise women workers about their issues and convince policy makers about their demands for recognition.

Gradually she convinced 100 domestic workers of her locality to unite for demanding their rights and dignity. She became a prominent leader and even received threats from some political parties. Her family was evidently worried and circumspect initially

when she confessed her intentions to create a trade union of domestic workers at the state level. They didn't initially believe in her capabilities to be able to achieve what she sought, but as time progressed she gained more confidence. She played a vital role in expanding domestic workers' membership in two other districts of West Bengal.

ActionAid Association and its implementing partner helped her to gain knowledge and inculcate a labour rights perspective in her. Lakshmi began with a dream to create equity for domestic workers of her locality with recognition and access to social protection regardless of economic and social challenges. She was able to connect her collective with the state-level union of domestic workers. She started to assist other workers to fill up their applications for social security benefits. In this way she gained confidence and trust of her fellow workers.

Women workers trusted her more because of what she had achieved. She established a strong linkage with other platforms and networks to claim rights for domestic workers and supported more than 100 domestic workers to get their bonus, social security benefits and weekly off.

## **Summary and Ways Forward**

Unionisation of workers needs a strong and sustainable approach to emphasise their identity as workers. Being part of a union enhances the feeling of solidarity and encourages ownership of the process of coming together. The perspective of members also changes when they realise that the organisation is their own and that only those in the trade/profession can become members. It also gives organisations and workers greater bargaining power and recognition vis-a-vis society and state. Besides, linkages to the state, other unions and broader social movements give greater exposure to the sector and the issue.

## **5.3 Core Issues Around which the Organisations Collectivise and Unionise**

### **5.3.1 Wages**

**Negotiating for Better Remuneration:** It has been observed that where domestic workers' unions are strong, especially in Jaipur, Karnataka and Telangana, the Minimum Wage Law has been introduced.

This law covers basic wages to be paid for cleaning, dusting, washing vessels and clothes. However, it also adds care of children, which is a fulltime responsible task. It is to be noted that nowhere has cooking been included in the table, nor is there any differentiation between skilled and unskilled tasks. The minimum wage fixed is quite weak and much below the consumption needs of the worker. A weekly holiday has been mentioned but there is no mention of enforcement in case the law is violated. This shows that it is important for a union and its leaders to get strengthened in bargaining and negotiating, if not with the individual employers then at least with the government. This also pushes members to learn and understand the power of their skills and develop leadership. In the case of the other partner organisations, like TCS, ISRD, CID and MA that have adopted the process of mobilisation of workers, but their meetings and discussions are less around labour entitlements and more around schemes that can be accessed through the welfare departments of the government, which is the easier way out.

### **5.3.2 Accessing Schemes**

Whether as unions or as collectives, the entry point for membership and organising has always been through accessing benefits. This has in a sense legitimised the relationship between the government and the people as that between a benefactor and a beneficiary. But in the process, a relationship of dependency has been perpetuated. It is to be noted that in this instance that the organisations mobilising workers around schemes, have done so in a context where the local governance and the administration have been quite proactive as far as such schemes go. ISRID in Bhopal region revealed that the Nigam or the

Municipal body, which seems to have taken over the role of the labour department, is much more active and has also given labour cards to domestic workers. It has also constituted separate domestic workers welfare boards. According to ISRID, there have been a total of 80,000 workers in all categories registered under the NIGAM. The positive thing about this promulgation has been that domestic workers have also been registered and given ID cards. And the organisations have registered 542 domestic workers under the Board. In Madhya Pradesh where the field review was conducted in Indore, Jabalpur and Bhopal, the schemes formed a central part of the discussions. The concern was with the constant fluidity of these schemes that kept changing, being withdrawn and new conditionalities attached from 2009 to 2011, from 2012 to 2015, and again from 2016 to 2018. Although having one political party in power all these years should have ensured stability, the Nigam has been rather whimsical about the schemes and their implementation. It was only in 2018, that the Labour Department also intervened and introduced another scheme, for the unorganised sector. While the organisations have been able to get widow pensions and maternity benefits for some women through the collectives, in the Focus Group Discussions it emerged that there was total disenchantment regarding the implementation of the schemes. A sense of frustration and disunity prevailed in the discussion, but it was laced with the hope that someday these schemes would become a reality. Unfortunately, the government plays on this hope by announcing new schemes every two years with great fanfare. The dissatisfaction with the present scenario has resulted in major struggles, sit-ins and demonstrations by the collectives. For instance nearly 500 workers gheraoed the Nigam in Jabalpur in 2013. This was much before the PIE project. In 2016, a public hearing too was organised in Bhopal that focused on all these grievances regarding the non-implementation of schemes.

It has been observed that the CCWD Orissa too has not had much exposure to issues related to rights and entitlements and here, the role the labour department has to be more proactive.



## **Summary and Ways Forward**

The focus on only accessing social welfare schemes limits and constricts workers' perspective in terms of rights. Focus must be put therefore on ensuring that the collectivisation process goes not towards promoting and strengthening the NGOs as far as the project lasts, but towards building and sustaining strong unions that promote and organise the women as labourer. Therefore while accessing schemes can be merely one entry point into mobilising and collectivising domestic workers, this cannot become an end in itself, given the erratic nature of welfare programmes that target individuals. It would be more sustainable to collectivise around issues of structural intervention within the government as labour representatives.

### **5.3.3 Advocacy with Labour Department and the State**

As stated earlier, much of the structure, vision and outlook of the organisations are also reflected in the kind of issues that are prioritised, the kinds of campaigns that are conducted and how negotiations with the government and labour department are carried out. While NGOs like ISRID, CID, and CCWD have been interacting more with the welfare departments and with the local municipal bodies for facilitating the welfare schemes, other organisations, working in union mode and recognise women as workers have been pushing the labour departments and the Judiciary in this direction. For advocacy at a higher level and for domestic worker mobilisation, the movement has also focused on promulgation of new laws and policies, as many of the issues faced by domestic workers have to do with lack of recognition of domestic workers as workers in law. Organisations like MSI have earlier, before the EC-PIE project, been part of coalitions at the national and international level that are pushing for regulation of this sector and calling for inclusion of domestic workers in state-provided social security benefits net.

Therefore while unions like Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union, the Visaka Gruha Karmika Sadhana Sangh (Mahila Action), Gruhakarmikula Sangha Telangana State-GUTS (MSI), Mysore Gruha Karmikara Trade Union

(RLHP), The Calcutta Samaritans (TCS) backed by a union federation PGPS do apply for schemes, the major thrust has been registration of domestic workers, their recognition and advocacy, mainly on the labour front, with the labour department as a stakeholder. Mewa Bharathi, the founder of RMKU is currently on the Unorganised Labour Board, representing the interests of domestic workers and she is also on the sexual harassment committee of the labour department.

These above unions have also had intensive trainings related to policy, legislation and the labour codes for domestic workers. The question of wages has not been systematically discussed except maybe in MSI and the Rajasthan union. These unions had also campaigned for the Minimum Wage Act and worked for its implementation in their states. Even so, wage negotiations and collective bargaining on wages was a crucial component of the claims-making structure of every domestic workers organisation.

MSI under the EC-PIE project has now formed 129 collectives with a total of 1,290 members. Each collective has 10 members. These groups have now become the foundation for the building up of the union at the State level. MSI has registered 1,168 Domestic workers and has managed to obtain access to social security schemes that include the Pradhanamantri Suraksha Bima Yojana, Pradhanmantri Jivan Jyoti Bima Yojana, Jandhan Yojana, National Pension Scheme, National Family Benefits Scheme and the Jan Surksha Yojana-11.

“Our approach is that we network with an organisation that is already working and we add the labour perspective. In every town we have a partner who monitors the work. As of now we are working in 11 towns including the EC-PIE projects. We have brought in the dimension of skill training in all the 11 towns. Now the Trade Union structure is the primary one and by the end of June 2019, we want to increase the membership to 5000.”

– Br. Varghese

*From Chapter 3: Montford Training Institute: A Case Study on Advocacy in Domestic Work.*

The RLHP has worked in effective coordination with the labour department and the advocacy has had a positive impact. In a meeting with him, the current Assistant Labour Commissioner seemed very cooperative and understanding of the fact that nature of domestic work is different from other forms of unorganised work including construction, rag pickers, etc. as they have identifiable employers and public work spaces.

“Under the Unorganised Sector Social Security Act 2008, the Unorganised Sector Social Security Board has been formed, which specifies 83 different forms of employment of which domestic work is one. Their registrations have now started. In our department we recognise that RLHP has pioneered the registration of a union. Twice they have had public meetings that I was also part of where the focus was to get whatever is their right as social security. The first step has been to register smart cards. The objective of this exercise is to recognise them legally as workers. Through this the various social benefits can be directly facilitated. This is just the beginning stage. We want to finish the registration of workers within 2018-2019. No smart cards have been issued yet in any part of the state. We are in the process of distributing application forms to reliable organisations like RLHP so that they can identify genuine workers and send in their applications, which we have started sending to the Head Office in Bangalore. It is challenging to both bring the domestic workers together and monitor minimum wages and to assess the employer- employee relationship; particularly since the work place is different from places like factories and industries where there is one identifiable employer with several employees under him/her. Complaints will need to be filed through the union and on behalf of workers or they can do it directly. We have not received any complaints from them so far. Wherever the workers are getting wages as low as Rs 200 and Rs 300, please bring them

here. We can then take it up. Media attention should be brought to this issue.”

– **Thamanna, Assistant Labour Commissioner**

*From Chapter 4: RLHP: A Case Study on Domestic Workers and Skill Development Programme.*

### **Basumathi: Case Study from the Calcutta Samaritans, Kolkata**

Basumati is a 30 years old domestic worker. She is a member of the larger domestic workers’ collective - Paschim Bango Griho Paricharika Samity (PGPS). She stays in North Kolkata and represents the domestic workers of her Bagbajar Ward in the district committee. She works in 12 houses where she cleans utensils and mops the rooms of the houses. She works hard from morning till evening and during a small interval returns to her house for preparing meals for her own family, taking care of her child and doing other household chores. In her own words:

“Before joining our collective I never received weekly off or any other facility. Three years ago, I was ignorant about my own identity as a “worker” and worked for 10 hours. From my employers I neither got any weekly off nor bonus. ActionAid Association and TCS came to our locality and informed us about our rights as labour and oriented us on how to do advocacy for claiming our rights before state departments and before our employers. We got much information about labour offices, actions of the domestic workers of other states and how they could achieve success etc. I felt confident about our group and actively initiated a membership drive in our locality and nearby places. Within three years our membership crossed five thousand and we formed district level and state level bodies. I participated in trainings on building leadership and other



skills. I got a certificate from the state labour department for my participation in skill building programme on domestic help.

I felt confident to talk to my employers about my weekly off and bonus. But they were not agreeable. My group – other domestic workers of my alliance supported me and they met my employers, interacted with them and bargained for my leave and bonus.

Last year, I got one month's extra salary as my bonus from all my employers and 4 days off in a month. Now I could spend more time at home and spend money for my child's education. I am very much confident that I can give bright future for my child and she will not face any compulsion to join my occupation."

### **5.3.4 The Workers' Facilitation Centre**

An important tool for mobilising is the concept of Workers' Facilitation Centres (WFC). The concept is not new, and it finds mention in the Unorganised Workers Social Security and Welfare Act (2008) as a mechanism that facilitates governance, in the absence of any mechanism for the unorganised sector. The WFC therefore becomes an important tool for the workers, as three important functions take place here. Database building, information about and accessibility to schemes and grievance redressal mechanisms. It is to be differentiated from the single window systems in some governance patterns. Only in the RMKS, WFC operations and the TCS programmes have the potential of WFC been fully exploited. The RMKS model is strong, with three WFCs set up that are visited by 100 workers who avail of the services and also participate actively in the centres. Even grievances are aired here, information about redressal mechanisms is given and cases too are heard. The Calcutta Samaritans (TCS) has established 10 such centres for the benefit of domestic workers. There is an interesting sidelight where some of the centres exceed their brief and conduct counselling sessions. One centre even conducts home nursing training. Such mechanisms are very important and ought to be adopted by the government, especially the labour ministry, to make the scheme inclusive for all workers. Otherwise

again it will remain very limited in reach and dependent on organisational funds, personnel, etc.

### **Workers' Facilitation Centre**

Set up as part of the EC-PIE project, the Union runs five Workers' Facilitation Centres each of which is located in different localities. The office opens at 9.45 a.m. which is when people start coming in to ask about the different schemes available for workers including scholarships for education, Bhamasha cards, Shubh Shakthi for women, pensions for women, the Tool kit yojana, Aadhar, Food card, opening of bank accounts, etc.

The workers are helped with filling in the forms and also with follow up till they get the benefits of the scheme they have applied for. Every day at least 5 to 20 people come in. People who come are largely from in and around the area where the WFC is located but a few people also come from far distances.

Issues like non-payment of wages by employees and contractors are also taken up. The community coordinators take turns in coming and sitting in the Centre, which provides the institutional base for their union that in fact makes its physical presence felt through the WFC.

All those who come have to pay a membership fee, which is Rs 50 for domestic workers and Rs 100 for construction workers.

In one centre over the past one and a half years around 2,500 workers have been supported.

*From Chapter 2 The Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union: A Case Study in Collectivisation and Unionisation.*

## Summary and Ways Forward

While in the EC-PIE programme some efforts have been undertaken to ensure that Workers' Facilitation Centres are put in place; the spirit of the mechanism and its relevance to domestic worker organisations have not been fully understood. These must be seen as an important tool for mobilising and strengthening the membership of the union that needs to be sustained beyond the life of this project if it has to retain its obvious dynamism. If the union withdraws and it gets absorbed as an arm of the labour department, then it may become another moribund bureaucratic institution that only pushes papers and applications rather than a vibrant worker body.

### 5.3.5 Migration, Trafficking and Live-in Workers

The live-in domestic worker, who more often than not is also a migrant or could also be trafficked does not seem to figure much in the reported agenda of most of the organisations. Even in focus group discussions and interviews very little awareness was evident except in maybe MSI and Rajasthan Mahila Kamgar Union. While RMKU, in the process of its routine organising work, has taken the specific vulnerabilities of the migrant workers into consideration, it has also taken up some specific cases of trafficking. As has MSI which has also traced the link of placement agencies, and supported rescue and rehabilitation processes. Some partner organisations, when asked pointedly about the issue of trafficking, were very quick to say that it does not happen in their project area, or they have not even looked at it.

When we went to get ration card for a single migrant woman along with a senior representative of the PUCL, the Chief Secretary rejected the application saying that these are all migrant labourers. But we also challenged and fought back saying “why, are they too not citizens of this country?” “If these are Bangladeshis then you will be in trouble since it is your responsibility to conduct enquiry and send them back to their country.” A lot of debate followed at the end of which an order was passed saying that a single migrant

woman could get a ration card based on the documents that she had even if it was from another state.

– **Mewa Bharathi, RMKU**

As part of PM's Skill India Plan, training is provided at grassroots level and 40 per cent placement has to be ensured. As part of this a placement agency brought 16 girls from Orissa and placed them in homes. They were trained in soft skills and placed in different clinics and homes where they were locked up with no access to their parents. We were approached and when we investigated, we found that they were practically prisoners. We took the help of reluctant police, rescued them, got their wages paid and they were sent back to Orissa where it became a big issue.

Now since a lot of domestic workers are coming out of Bihar, Jharkhand and other tribal areas, a lot of placement agencies have sprung up that are acting as mediators. We have done a study of such agencies in Delhi and asked that they be registered under the Shops and Establishment Act. This is important since many of these girls were being trafficked into sex work, domestic work, etc.

There is an Interstate Migration Act that is very ineffectual. The Delhi government was insisting that domestic workers should be registered with the police but we said that they should be registered with the labour department since they are workers and not criminals. We are insisting that both employers and workers should be registered with the labour department.

– **Brother Varghese, MSI, Hyderabad**

The first case of "rescue" that we handled was sometime in 2010. A minor girl had been trafficked from Karnataka to Jaipur for domestic work. She was from a village and her parents had sold her for Rs 5,000 to an employer who was working in Reliance to



do his domestic work. Her parents forgot all about her and went away on some other work and her employer brought her to Jaipur. The employer and his wife used to mistreat her a lot. They even used to bite her! There was a little child that she used to bring to the neighbourhood park. She was spotted there by a journalist who started to have casual conversations with her after which she started confiding in him about the mistreatment. She was about 17/18 years old by then. He then went and spoke to Kavitha of PUCL and asked if she could be brought out from the house. The apartment she worked in was opposite the police station. We approached the labour department and along with them and the police and the journalist we went to the house. We had not revealed the precise location even to the police in case they engineered the disappearance of the girl! When we went inside they told us that the girl was having a bath. The “malkin” realised that something was wrong and went inside and threatened the girl near the bathroom saying that she would kill her if she complained against them. The girl was obviously very shaken and started crying. We tactfully drew her aside away from the malkin and she slowly started speaking to us. She showed us all the bite marks. We brought her to the police where an FIR was lodged. The Superintendent thought that we were creating unnecessary problems. Finally the girl decided that she did not want to pursue a case. After negotiations she got Rs.1 lakh as compensation and she wanted to go back to her parents. It took us three years to locate her parents till which time she was sent to a home where she also started studying. When her parents were found she went back to them but subsequently she came back, got married here and settled down in the neighbouring town of Bhilwara. The labour department was very cooperative in this matter.

**– Mewa Bharathi, RMKS, Jaipur**

### 5.3.6 Accusations of Theft

Accusations of theft are almost regular in a domestic worker's life given the class and caste prejudices and biases that inform their realities. Whenever there is a theft in the household, the first suspect is the domestic worker since she is the only "outsider" within the family. In the focus group discussions not only did many stories emerge but also the varied strategies that the unions have used to deal with the menace that involves confronting and negotiating with the owner, the police and the domestic worker herself. The greatest problem they have found is that accusations are arbitrary, there is little or no legal protection and the employer employee relationship being private, this allegation sticks. Most times it was found that these accusations were put when the owner wanted to dismiss the domestic worker because she was being too assertive about her rights. Or it could be to take the blame away from a family member who most probably was the culprit. However due to financial and other vulnerabilities there are cases in which the domestic worker is also found guilty. It is interesting to see how unions like the RMKU have learnt to deal with this complex issue in a way so that neither ethical values are compromised nor is injustice perpetrated. Public campaigns have also been launched to challenge the way domestic workers are stigmatised as thieves.

The owners had given the keys of their house to Hemavathy, the domestic worker, and gone to Kerala for a marriage. She had to clean the house and water the garden till they came back. When they returned she asked them for her salary since they had not paid her for two months. She had not asked for it earlier since they were busy with marriage and thought they would pay her once they finished with the festivities. She needed her salary to pay admission fees for her son. At that time they told her that they had found two bangles missing in the house and they would pay her if she returned them. She was shocked and asked why she would steal from them when they had given her the keys to the house. The owners made her swear her innocence on the Quran and even took

her to the Masjid. But they still refused to believe her. She went home very depressed since on the one hand she had a husband with TB who she had to care for and on the other she was worried about her reputation. What will people think? She told nobody about it. A few days later the police came to her house as the family had approached the police without her knowledge. Everybody around wondered what had happened. Hemavathy did not tell anybody anything. She was just standing around and crying. A woman from the women's organisation went and asked her what had happened. She shared her story and told of how the owners had not even given her wages of Rs 4,000. When she was taken to the police station, members of Dhvani went there and asked to read the complaint. They also demanded that the employers be brought to the station and that they too wanted to register a counter complaint against the owners. The police who were till then speaking on behalf of the owners immediately changed their tone and said that they had not arrested Hemavathy and had merely brought her in for questioning. They even called the employers and asked how they could make allegations on somebody who had worked with them for 10 years. The women also questioned them as to how they could not pay the wages that were due. After a lot of arguments, they asked the police to take back their complaint. A few weeks later the employers called her and asked her to come to connect the wages that were due to her. She went there but refused to take the money they were offering her saying "I don't know why you did what you did and what you did with the bangles but I don't want any of your money" and came away. She had her self respect and pride.

**– Narrated by Mangalauri,  
Dhwani Mahila Okkoota, Mysore**

A full-time live-in worker was once accused of theft. It was a family of four comprising the wife, the husband and their two sons. All of them used to go out to work. The woman used to live out of

Jaipur and come home once in 15 days. Her gold bangles were stolen and she accused the domestic worker saying that nobody else could have done it since the keys were on the almirah. The domestic worker was taken to the police station where she denied the allegations. We also questioned her independently and she denied it with us too. We helped her leave the house and a month later it was discovered that it was the domestic worker's son and husband living with her who had stolen the bangles and sold them. The Malkin took back the case and forgave her. I was sad that the mother had to take the blame for what her son and husband did. When we find that the domestic worker is in the wrong then we talk to and counsel her. Even if she did steal we have little choice but to support her since otherwise we all will be indicted. But we deal with her individually and warn her that it should not happen again.

In another case a domestic worker had stolen something and the employer's son saw and told his mother. The employer did not accept it since she trusted her maid totally. They put a CCTV camera in the house and caught her on camera stealing again. The Malkin called the union leader home, gave her tea and showed her the evidence and asked "now what should I do?" We told her to take whatever action she thought was right. She sent her out of the house and finally the domestic worker went back to Bengal. When new members come into the union, we speak to them about ethics and responsibility and say that we do not accept stealing. There are some areas in Jaipur where the allegations are always false. It is a bad area for domestic workers. We did a rally there protesting this with slogans and placards saying "Chori ka jhoota ilzaam lagana band karo band karo!!"

**– Kamlesh and Meena,  
Community Activists, Jaipur**



## **Summary and Ways Forward**

As seen in different narrations of domestic workers, majority of the cases are wrongfully filed as a result of which she is shamed, her reputation is damaged and in the worst case, she does not get a job anywhere. It is important for all unions and organisations to call for legitimate enquiry process when theft takes place in the work premises of domestic workers. Only after a full enquiry by the employer, the police can intervene with sensitivity and discretion. The attempt should be to push for clear rules of function. A neutral and independent third-party arbitration is important.

## **5.4 Addressing Issues of Gender, Violence and Feminist Solidarities**

Domestic work, as mentioned earlier, has to be placed in the larger context of patriarchy and subjugation of women, which in turn is embedded in issues of caste and class. In the context of the centrality of women to domestic work that is so gendered and devalued, it becomes imperative for all domestic worker collectives and unions to address the issue of patriarchy, which is deeply internalised by the woman and that which is embedded in the institution of the family – her own and which she goes to as her site of “work”. Organisations would therefore need to focus on women not only as workers in production roles, but also as women with social family roles, which would imply also addressing issues like domestic violence, dowry and child marriage. Unfortunately this perspective seemed to be drastically lacking in the interventions with a few exceptions.

As for instance in the discussion across the Bhopal region it was observed that while in the FGDs, individual women were vocal showing considerable leadership qualities in accessing schemes etc. but they were hesitant to say much about core issues of workers' rights, issues at the workplace, low wages and so on. Infact they expressed that they could not talk about these issues for fear of losing their jobs. They also felt that if they did speak about such issues, they would be disloyal to their employers, which revealed that they were alien to the idea of

struggle at the workplace. As one woman said rather defensively “I can’t take leave. I need to go now...If I don’t go, who will do their cooking? What will they eat?”

However it is clear that the women find it difficult to participate in the activities of the collective/ union not only because of their fear of the employers but also that of their husbands who are insecure about the empowerment of their wives. Infact many of the activists who are collectivising the women, spoke about how they have to simultaneously deal with the husbands and the families of the workers including responding to their issues of violence within their own homes.

One noticed a marked difference in those organisations that had emerged from or had developed some organic links with the women’s movement or other social movements. This included Mahila Action, Rajasthan Mahila Kamgar Union, Mysore Gruha Karmikara Trade Union and to some extent, The Calcutta Samaritans (TCS), which had also addressed issues related to domestic violence, sexual harassment as also “Love” cases. When there is a holistic approach to organising the women both as women and as worker it is clear that the collective and union become a very strong and empowering space in which they also feel at home.

“I started with doing a survey in which I went from house to house talking to domestic workers. Slowly they started coming out and speaking about their problems, much of which revolved around their husbands. The husbands too were suspicious when I would talk to their wives saying “why are you calling our women? Are you going to give us any money?” Once in a meeting a husband came and shouted at me accusing me of misleading his wife but I reassured him that I was actually helping her. But I slowly built up a relationship with both the domestic worker and her husband... calling them “Anna” whenever I met them on the road. The husbands have now totally changed and have become very cooperative even offering to inform their wives if there are any meetings.”

– **Anasuyamma: Coordinator, Suryapet**

*From Chapter 3: Montford Training Institute: A Case Study on Advocacy in Domestic Work.*

### **Sunita Kewat: Case Study from Bhopal**

Forty-three year old Sunita Kewat is a domestic worker who belongs to Banjari, Bhopal of Mahi, is a group leader. The community mobiliser was conducting a workshop on domestic violence for the members. After the session was over Sunita met the community mobiliser to narrate her plight. Her husband was a habitual alcohol drinker and used to beat her up regularly and she was fed up with her life. She was invited to the office to share more details of the case with the intention of backing her up with more support and confidence. We took her to Gauravi (The one-stop centre constituted for redressal of women issues). Gauravi intervened in the case and provided counselling to both, but failed to unite them due to the adamant attitude of the husband. Then, through our legal aid programme an advocate came forward to settle the case as per law. Presently divorce petition has been filed in the court and the case is going on. The domestic worker is peacefully leading her life.

The Union is also an important personal space for the women since they are each other's support group in cases of domestic violence which is an issue that is addressed seriously at different levels including individual counselling, collective action and capacity building. For instance to enable them to understand and deal with these forms of violence in more effective ways, in June 2018 they had a five day workshop in which 92 women participated. Plans are afoot for setting up of regular counselling centres within different localities to deal with the enormity of the issue. They have dealt with more than 300 cases of domestic violence out of which 165 have been resolved. We have realised that domestic violence is a great equaliser that brings the domestic worker and her employer

together. For finally the man is the same whether he is a worker or whether he is Adani...and when it comes to violence, women are all the same. If there is a friendship then they talk to each other it. It is also seen that domestic violence happens largely to those women who stay at home. The working women leave the house early and such incidents are rare. For example Kalpana, a domestic worker counsels her own employer who is as much a victim of domestic violence as she is. Since Kalpana is strong and has found ways of dealing with it, she has been able to give her employer a lot of moral support. She has even invited her employer to come for our meetings to get some support.

Now we are beginning to think that when we celebrate March 8, we should ask the women to bring their men and their children and make it like a mela where they eat and discuss together. Only when the husband becomes a true partner to his wife, she can be really at peace. So it becomes a larger dialogue on equality between the genders and a kind of collective counselling! We have to evolve more creative solutions and models. Traditional ideas will not work anymore. We are resolved to celebrate March 8 very differently now.

– **Harkesh Bugalia**

From Chapter 2 The Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union: A Case Study in Collectivisation and Unionisation

For the past three years I feel that the union has become like my own mother's house – in fact even better. The kind of information and support we have got here is incredible. What more would a woman want. We sit like sisters and talk to each other. We are so burdened with so many money problems at home that we even feel like dying... but I feel so strengthened here. I have become strong and confident after coming here.

– **Bhagyamma, Paschim Vahini, Mysore**



### **5.4.1 Sexual Harassment at Workplace**

There was very little stated information about cases of sexual harassment of workers at the workplace or outside. It appears generally that organisations have shied away from even wanting to know about such cases or even the Act that is in place. Maybe the hesitation is dependent both on the region and also on the kind of spaces the organisation occupies and talks about, especially since non-assertion or oppression vis-a-vis issues of sexuality has been traditionally internalised. However, sexual harassment is a well-known reality for domestic workers, especially for the child domestic workers and the live-in, migrant workers who are the most vulnerable to not only harassment but also rape, sexual assault and sometimes even murder. Part-time domestic workers often deal with it on their own, either by reacting sharply or by leaving the job. But this reality continues to be covered in a cloud of silence as it happens in the organised sector too. This silence is the direct result of fear of humiliation, job loss and victim blaming and shaming. Often, even the women of the house don't believe the domestic worker. Through the review of all reports, personal presentations, trainings and legal intervention related to domestic violence, many cases of sexual harassment or child abuse were not reported. However, from the cases that did get reported and showed up during the process of the review, the prevalence was reinforced. And from most such cases it was also clear that empowered women workers as a collective are more capable of dealing with it on their own terms and in their own ways!

About three years ago we had a case of sexual harassment in Malaviya Nagar where an employer's friend tried to rape a domestic worker. She went and lodged a complaint with the police who took immediate action. The employer who also had tried to sexually harass her tried to get her to withdraw the case. He himself had tried to molest her earlier when his wife had gone away on work and he was at home and had started drinking. The employer's wife also tried to get her to withdraw the case asking her to forgive him on the plea that he was not habituated to drinking. The woman refused to withdraw the case saying that today he has done it with

me, tomorrow he will do this to other women. Women have started speaking out against sexual harassment but they don't want to register cases. Usually they try to sort it out themselves. Near the ActionAid Association office there was a case of a young girl who was refusing to go to work since an old man was harassing her. The local leader, Kalpana said I will manage this and went and caught the old man trying to sexually harass the child and confronted him by asking "What is your problem? You seem to have a disease." She also came out onto the road and screamed despite the employers asking her not to. She told the employers that nobody will come and work in this house unless you are able to change the old man's habits. Nobody went there for about six months. When one worker was finally sent there, she went with the full knowledge and also in the hope that there would be some change. So the women know how to handle such issues. They are totally unafraid.

– **Mewa Bharathi, RMKU, Jaipur**

The case of Manjula was what pushed the federation to start looking at the issue of sexual exploitation of domestic workers. She was from Muneshwarnagar and was part of the women's group there. The Dhvani women were informed that she had been beaten on her head with a machete by her employer and was admitted to a hospital in a serious state with heavy bleeding. When the women went to see her at some local clinic, they saw that the management was trying to hush the case up. They forced the owners to shift Manjula to a better hospital. On enquiries it was revealed that the employer's son had tried to rape her when she was sweeping and when she resisted, he had hit her on the head. Finally, when they went to the police station where the federation women tried to lodge a case, they brought evidence to state that the son was mentally challenged. Finally, a compensation of Rs 60,000 was paid to cover her medical costs and to take care of her expenditure since she was unable to go for work.

*From Chapter 4: RLHP: A Case Study on Domestic Workers and Skill Development Programme.*

## **Summary and Ways Forward**

In the above instances it is apparent that when a systematic attempt is made to integrate the holistic empowerment of women with the process of unionising or collectivising this could in fact broaden notions of labour from a gendered perspective and generate new understanding of work as well as methodologies of negotiating with and challenging the status quo that is as much personal as it is public. In the case of sexual harassment at work place it is clear that with no mechanisms to address the issue, voices go unheard. While the Protection from Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act speaks of Local Complaints Committees, they are usually located only in the district headquarters, far away to be easily accessed by all and they are still to be set up and made functional. It is absolutely urgent for the state, employers and collectives/unions to establish ad hoc local complaints committees covering the area of more than 10 households together.

## **5.5 Vassals or Workers: Addressing and Challenging the Intersectionality of Caste/Gender Divides in Workplace**

Caste is the third axis on which the edifice of domestic work is built along with class and gender and perhaps the most invisible and the most unstated. It is in fact so subtle that some women do not even think of it as discrimination. And it is hardly ever spoken about or discussed in meetings. They are diffident about it, as they fear that any kind of questioning will lead to the employers dismissing them from their jobs. But this issue does come up in the language, in the attitude of the employers. In one example in Jabalpur, caste statements came out in the theft case alleged by the employer.

Laxmi Choudhury was employed in a house as a masseur. But she belongs to the SC community. During the demonetisation period,



November of 2017, Laxmi was in the house, while the employer was counting old notes. Laxmi actually was on leave on 10th of November. But when she went to work on 11th November, the employer accused her of robbing the money and held her as a hostage the whole day. At that time the employer made a casteist accusatory statement, "Why are you doing massage, that's done only by the barber caste? You belong to the Chamar caste, (SC)." This accusation implied that Laxmi had taken the money! The employer took her to the police station, but the police did not investigate the robbery case and did not register a caste discrimination case under the SC/ST atrocities case. Laxmi placed her case before Jan Sunvayi.

The most visible instance of how caste is institutionalised and even defines the employer employee relationship could be seen in Srirangapatna near Mysore where RLHP is based and working.

Srirangapatna is a temple town dominated by Brahmins whose primary occupation is conducting the death-related ceremonies since almost all the Hindu communities who cremate, come here to immerse the ashes of the departed. It is also a tourist centre. The domestic workers are by and large Gowdas. The caste system is highly visible and well entrenched in this space where ritual purity is practiced at its best/worst and discrimination is not only social but also economic. Apart from caste discrimination, the salaries are ridiculously low coming down to as much as Rs 400 per month that is paid for 2 hours of work everyday. When asked why they accept such low salaries Ratnamma, the Secretary of the Srirangapatna unit sums it up, "On the one hand the employers here are quite poor so they cannot give us more. On the other hand, sentiment is the only obstacle for us for not asking and getting more salary."

This reveals the very intimate and nuanced ongoing engagement between an increasingly aware class of workers with a community



that sits at the top of the caste hierarchy, which however is simultaneously at the bottom of the class hierarchy within. There is an awareness on the part of the domestic workers that helps them subvert and challenge the feudal relationship of interdependency through which they are emotionally and socially blackmailed into being exploited into accepting low salaries and lower status. There is almost amused pity on their parts for an older generation of Brahmins who are not only poor but visibly anachronistic in these changing times with their extreme and discriminatory notions of purity.

“I am working in two houses where I am getting paid Rs 800. I don’t do any of the inside work; only the outside work of cleaning vessels and washing clothes. They don’t let me work in the house since they are Brahmins and do their own work. If I do work inside then they pay me extra. Most Brahmins don’t let us into the kitchens at all and also the deity room. When they want they will let us in anywhere. When they don’t they will not allow us anywhere.”

When we wash their vessels, they wash it again with tamarind water. Not all are like that but many are. The older ones tell us “We are old timers *mundede* (a perjorative term for widows that is strangely often used affectionately for children) don’t do like that... you don’t understand *madi* (ritual purity)” Now not many are like that. They have also changed. Now the younger generation has no such problem. They are happy if somebody comes and works in the house. If the older generation and in laws are not at home they will even get the cooking done by us! The older generation will not change!

**– Padmavathy,  
Domestic Worker, Sriraganapatna,  
a Temple Town in Mysore**

*From Chapter 4: RLHP: A Case Study on Domestic Workers and Skill Development Programme.*

## **Summary and Ways Forward**

In the FGDs of Madhya Pradesh, Vizag and Andhra Pradesh, when this topic was raised, women vociferously spoke of practices of discrimination. From these and other examples one came across through case studies and discussions, it is obvious that the reality of caste needs to be addressed as seriously as that of gender and class – both in terms of increasing the consciousness of the worker as also the employee. Without being in denial conscious attempts should be made to create spaces to discuss and understand the working of caste discrimination and empower voices to speak out against it. This is the only way caste discrimination at workplace can be addressed by unions.

## **5.6 Redefining the Employer-Employee Relationship**

Apart from attempting to fight for fair wages and dignified working conditions through appropriate legal provisions and negotiations with employers, most organisations and unions are also attempting to give effect to a more “professional” relationship between the employer and employee. This is to primarily ensure that the social hierarchies of gender, caste and class do not create exploitative working conditions for the domestic worker within the personal yet public workspace of the home. This is being done through:

- Regular employer -employee interaction programmes like in Mysore and Hyderabad.
- Innovative initiatives like “Selfie with Employer” in Hyderabad.
- Empowering individual domestic workers to engender change both in their home and in their work places as in Jaipur.

Some of the owners accepted the positive role that domestic workers have played and others became quite defensive. But other issues like leave and minimum wages came up that was also countered by

them. They also did not accept that they did not give respect to the domestic workers. However, while they were not ready to change from within, they were all ready to extend support to the demands that the union wanted to make in front of the government! Some complaints were also heard about the erratic timings of the domestic workers and their taking frequent leave. This issue was also discussed. Minimum wages were discussed and the employers said, “how can we pay so much...you also have to see the size of the house and the hours and quantum of work etc.”

**– Ravindranath, RLHP, Mysore**

## **5.6.1 Some Best Practices**

### **a. Selfie with Employer:**

The “Selfie with Employer” initiative in Hyderabad has proved to be a fairly effective “best practice” that uses social media and technology to affirm and strengthen a healthy and democratic worker-employee relationship that can also be intimate and personal. Started in 2015, about 100-150 selfies are gathered from each town that are then shared on Facebook and Twitter. However as we heard, many don’t want the selfie to be put up, either because they don’t get permission from their husbands or because they are dressed inappropriately in nighties! This indicates how in this initiative, both the employer and employee are circumscribed by the norms of patriarchy and the devalued nature of domestic work – the domestic worker by her female employer and the female employer by her own husband and family.

“Model” employers are identified by the coordinator and judged on the basis of whether they treat the worker equally, share tea with her, pay her decent wages, give her adequate rest, etc. The focus is on building a stronger economic, emotional and informal relationship between the employer and the employee that is not confrontational.

Some negative experiences of taking these selfies without properly affirming the antecedents of the employers were also shared indicating

that this initiative needs to be thought through and deepened without reducing it to a reporting tool.

Employers are also sought to be included in programmes related to training and income generation. They buy the products that the domestic workers are trained to make including phenol, washing powder, etc. This has improved the employer-employee relationship.

#### **b. Democratising the Employer-Employee Relationship:**

As part of the review we visited the home of Kalpana Atreya where Kanika, a member of the RMKU works. She and Kanika seem to have democratised the employer-employee relationship without compromising on its human dimension. It not only seems equal and open but also marked with a lot of affection that is not patronising. Kanika obviously is very much at home in this house. She sits easily next to her “Bhabhi” on the sofa and talks about their relationship and work. Class and caste divides are apparently blurred and the relationship, as they keep stating, is not so much professional as it is based on personal trust and respect.

“When Kanika became a member of the union I was happy and fully in support of it. Why should I worry about it since it is for her support and for women like her? It will make a difference in the way society looks at domestic workers. See she rides to work on a gaadi and parks it next to our car. The neighbour did not like it. She tried to push it away from there. Kanika got very upset and told them ‘What is your problem? Next time I will come to work by car and what will you do?’ Finally that woman came and said sorry to me and my husband. I don’t like calling her ‘Bai’ Does she not have her own name? People around were very surprised when I used to call her by her name. Now they have also changed and call their maids by their names. I trust Kanika totally. Bengalis never steal, I leave the house keys with her and I don’t lock anything in the house. She has absolutely no greed. Infact I have to force her to take anything in this house. In many cases of theft infact I know that it is the boys



of the house who steal from the family and they put the blame on the poor domestic worker which is so unfair. Yes there are a lot of Bengalis coming into Rajasthan but that is because they have no land or employment back in their villages and they are victims of poverty and ill health.”

*From Chapter 2: The Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union: A Case Study in Collectivisation and Unionisation.*

## **Summary and Ways Forward**

As a general development, the observation is that in the more urbanised sectors especially with more neo-liberal awareness seeping in, employers are looking at domestic workers as employees entitled to benefits like insurance and welfare schemes from the government but not necessarily rights that they have to ensure. Many employers who are largely women also reach out to help domestic workers in their domestic violence issues but by and large that is where it ends. For caste/class prejudices are so deeply entrenched that in moments of crisis the ugly reality of feudal relationships emerges and the employee gets reduced to being a servant. However, it is important to evolve more creative and challenging ways to open up the employer-employee relationship such that it lays the foundations for a truly democratised workspace for domestic workers.

## **5.7 Skill Development for Empowerment**

The concept of Skill India and the EC-PIEs important component of skill development were introduced around the same time. However, the perspectives were different. The initial expectation of being able to touch the aspirational mobility of domestic workers, and therefore get job grading at work, or explore alternatives to domestic work, is still in its infancy. Some partners introduced the skill programmes, because it was asked for as part of the project proposal, while others had already introduced this upgrading of skills in the other informal sectors that they were already working with.

What was significantly reported was that skill development was perceived both as a means of empowerment, as well as a method of generating alternate income sources.

A quick assessment at the reported trainings by all organisations reveals that the numbers achieved are relatively small even in the third year of the project, and many are just completing their classes. It is only MSI, with its other institutional background and infrastructure that has reportedly trained 3,124 women out of membership of 3,400 members. However, the relevance and long-term sustainability of these initiatives still remains to be seen. As for instance, the products that MSI has been trying to manufacture and sell at present do not appear to be too relevant in the lives of those groups met in Nalgonda. These groups in fact seemed more invested in income generating ventures that they themselves had initiated embroidery and craft for which they have even identified marketing links in the city. The market for products like washing soap being made by the women seems a little limited. While plans were being put into place to ensure long-term sustainability with marketing networks, these would obviously need more time and inputs to fructify, which cannot happen within the project period.

In the case of MSI, since many of these products are being made within individual women's homes, the issue of quality control becomes important, especially when efforts are being made to scale up this micro enterprise.

While one was able to see and hear about how much tailoring and beauticians' classes will help them to earn extra income, no major jump was seen either in income or even alternate livelihood. Some women spoke of tailoring and the sale of washing powder, shampoo, etc. helping them to earn a maximum extra income of Rs 1,000 to Rs 1,500.

In the skill building programmes, there was by and large more emphasis on traditionally gendered skills like tailoring, beautician and home care courses. It was interesting to note the departure in training in the case of TCS, which provided home nursing, midwives training for nursing and

geriatric care and home appliances repair. TCS pioneered an innovative approach of training for cooking at a restaurant. Mahila Action (MA) advocated driving classes to train workers to become cab drivers. Under MSI too, women have gone into skills different from traditional skills or “accepted” skills.

### 5.7.1 Some Best Practices in Collectivising Skill Strengths

It was observed that while most of the skill programmes catered to individuals and their personal development, it was only in Bhopal and Jaipur that one saw an attempt being made to collectivise their skill strengths. The example of Bhopal, Rahul Nagar could in fact be taken as a best practice.

- a. **Bhopal:** A group of women who completed their beautician training of three months, took the initiative and set up a shop. The shop is group managed but the main responsibility has been taken by a domestic worker who comes from a business family. In this group there are three domestic workers, who still go for work and two college students, whose mothers are domestic workers. They had pledged their gold for the shop which also sells beauty products as well as purses and other small knick knacks. This main lady gets orders from individuals for beauty care at their doorstep, and these girls are deputed to the clients. The income earned is their personal income, while the main leader keeps the commission. It functions like an informal cooperative, and five of them have been empowered by this initiative. They now want to know how to avail of loans so they can branch out on their own. The question of loans and the market is a perpetual challenge, and the only way to sustainability and continuity. In case of the Rahul Nagar venture, the ISRID member has promised to link them to loans from banks.
- b. **Jaipur:** Another attempt of skill development for collective benefit of domestic workers is by setting up a centre where the organisation (RMKS) promotes tailoring skill as a collective and a business, marketing all as a group effort.

- c. **Mysore:** The life skill training for domestic workers through which 260 women have been trained so far is a 20 day module that is rather intense and highly transformative and has helped the workers both personally and professionally. Diverse resource people are called to talk about a range of issues from gender, health, nutrition, labour rights; give information about government schemes and provide skill training in cooking, ironing, housekeeping, etc. Then there is on-the-job training in Green Hotel, a partner for many years. It is a certificate programme with the certificates being distributed in public programmes in the presence of government officials and the media so that it gets wide publicity enhancing public awareness.

“Before we felt that the work we did was demeaning. I would not even tell others that I am doing domestic work since I felt ashamed and wondered what people would think of me. Now after the training I feel so much more confident. There is nothing wrong in what I am doing. The employers have a need for help and we have a need for money that will help us to survive. Through the training I also learnt a lot about society, about the nature of our work, our rights. Before we thought and did nothing more than go to work, come back, cook, eat, watch TV, etc. But now I have realised that we do need to come together to fight for our rights and dignity. When we have problems, we also need somebody to go to. Just like the way construction workers and other workers have theirs.

I feel as if my eyes have opened to a wider reality. I have even learnt to argue with my employers. I told them that you will never think about me when I fall ill and even when I am dying, but when you fall ill, you expect me to come and look after you. How fair is that? I told them that I learnt all this at the meetings that I am attending. They told me ‘Oh you have learnt all this and are now coming and threatening us with all that you know!’ So now they are quite open to all that I say and my questions! They have even helped me with my daughter’s wedding. Though they are giving me Rs 400, I have argued a great deal with them to pay me more and now they have assured me that they will increase my salary. When I first started



they were giving me Rs 30. They are purohiths. I only put up with them because they have really helped me out when I was in great difficulty. My husband was an alcoholic and some days there was no food in the house and we used to go hungry. It was at that time that they stood with me and even helped me educate the children. It is with that “neeyath” that I help them.”

**– Padma, Mysore. She recently completed a training programme organised by RLHP in Srirangapatnam**

*From Chapter 4: RLHP: A Case Study on Domestic Workers and Skill Development Programme.*

### **Pramila Behera: Case Study from Cuttack**

Pramila, aged 27, is an active member of the domestic worker’s collective facilitated in Kathajodi Bihar slum, Cuttack. She stays with her husband and two kids. Her husband is daily wage labourer. However it was sometimes difficult for them to get even daily wage assignment. She faced a lot of hardship to maintain her family but continued to have a dream and she also displayed the courage to fulfil the dream. After the intervention in a monthly meeting of the collectives, CCWD staff put forward a proposal of driving training for women. Pramila was the first to stand up to break the stereotype and came forward for the training. She joined as a trainee to drive an auto. It was observed that she learned faster as compared to other trainees. Now she has successfully completed the training without missing a single day and despite all the obstacles she faced including being discouraged with patriarchal biases. After getting the license she now plans to drive a passenger auto in Cuttack and wants to be the first lady auto driver.

## **5.7.2 Addressing Issues of Self Esteem**

When one of the reviewers met with a group of adolescents in Indore (Skill class), she addressed issues related to their self esteem. Through

the mirror exercise, they were asked to look at their image in the mirror, appreciate it and see how they feel. The discussion revealed insights about how we look at our bodies and ourselves with so much negativity, and how this is taught negativity. This is so deeply internalised that we don't love ourselves and this in turn inhibits individual growth.

### 5.7.3 Summary and Ways Forward

While it is understood that these skill programmes are tools for economic growth, it is equally important to see them as processes of personal empowerment. It is therefore critical to incorporate personal growth skills in these trainings. Even in cases where skill development is used to generate additional income, it needs to be planned and executed in such a manner that it is made sustainable in the long run. Additionally it is important to go beyond looking at women and girls as beneficiaries, and look at them as partners and participants in development. The classes held for the women and girls must incorporate a personality growth agenda, include empathy and sensitivity issues and equip teachers with this understanding. While issues of patriarchy, women's role, and feminisation of labour are all being raised here as in any leadership building programme, these critical perspectives have to be further developed. Of course, it must be mentioned that in the short span of the EC-PIE project, there has been a good number of women leaders created in the domestic work collectives.

Our focus is not on the dimension of "labour" but on the entire human being. Women's emotional empowerment is important. The tools we use are not the different laws related to labour and violence but also history. History of strong women and men is for instance part of the motivational bouquet through which we build resistance.

Our goal is to encourage the women and workers to "jabaan chadaana" i.e. increase bargaining power at all levels. Therefore, our biggest indicator of success is when the women begin to talk back or retort.

After being empowered through these skills they are well equipped to bargain for better wages and working conditions. Today they are very strong and confident and even mobile since many of them go around on their scootys! Our basic approach revolves around training the women in human values.

– **Harkesh Bugalia, Jaipur**

## Chapter VI

# Conclusion and Recommendations

### 6.1 The Scenario of the Domestic Work Sector

Urban employment rates for women figure high in the domestic work sector. Two third of urban women's employment is in the domestic work sector. Considering that migration to cities is increasing, support systems of family are disappearing, the cities and households absorb large numbers of domestic workers. Demand and supply factors coexist equally. In the city therefore, the need is to build up data base, inclusion in the city ward committees, as well as negotiations with employers. The welfare schemes, the existing Act for workers and engagement with the labour commissioner - all support implementation of policies and laws. Creation of collectives in slums and around apartments, mapping the workforce and including the migrant workforce needs to be done. Important points of negotiations either with RWAs in apartments or through collectives with the labour department and the DC office should include issuing notices about the minimum wages that should accrue, leave and other benefits to the employers. Reach out to other organisations working in slums with women to spread awareness, and mobilise for greater visibility. Engage with the local police stations as well as at the higher level, when cases are taken up, especially that of allegation of theft, or sexual harassment, or of exploitation of live-in worker. Any case or struggle is a platform for lobbying, and engaging the traditional media and social media, to enhance visibility.

#### 6.1.1 State Level

All important decisions on labour and various issues of violence at the workplace, have to be addressed by the labour ministry of the state. As



domestic workers are largely women, the department of women and child welfare too has to be involved. In fact in 2007, it was the National Women's Commission that drafted legislation for domestic workers. The state women's commissions too should be activated. It has to be ensured that there is coordination between various domestic worker organisations and unions at the state level to bring about changes, amendments, introduce minimum wages through the minimum wage board for the benefit of domestic workers. Sustained campaign is necessary at the state level to activate or set up the Tripartite Social Security Board. The unorganised workers social security board, as per the Act of 2008 has been set up in some states but not in all the states where the project is running. It is important for all organisations at the state level to campaign for the setting up of the board as per the Act, so that a viable mechanism can be created. The labour ministry of the state will have to be pressurised to set up or to activate the board, the registration of domestic workers as workers, and the facilitation of schemes. Another important state level campaign to be launched is the setting up of worker facilitation centres at the municipal corporation level as well as the district level. This mechanism will enable domestic workers to be organised as well as benefit from the schemes and programmes. It will be a concrete mechanism that can alleviate the concerns of the members of this very scattered, unorganised workforce.

The minimum wage board has to be continuously petitioned regarding the standards of salary, leave and basic workplace rights. In some states, after much debate and discussion on the wage structure, unions have found their own way of dealing with non-payment of wages. The state's legal services have a role to play and the organisations and unions, especially in cases of trafficking and live-in workers, should utilise these services, as well as be able to handle the police system.

The cases of allegations of theft, of caste discrimination, of sexual harassment and those of accident compensation have to be addressed at the state level. This will also help to build up opinion amongst the state players. Once a case takes place, it is important to look into the procedure followed to ensure that the correct laws are implemented.

At the state level therefore the regional office should engage in consistent advocacy, to realise certain new protocols to be set up in this sector that is so vulnerable given the lack of a proper law or legal framework. In connection with sexual harassment cases at the state level, the women's commission has to set up local complaints committee, so that the women workers who face sexual harassment at work have easy access to a complaints mechanism.

### **6.1.2 Regional Level**

The issues that plague domestic workers at workplace are by and large the same - wages, leave, health benefits, social security, employers' mind-set, tasks done, hours of work - in all regions across the country. Socially and economically too the women come from the same caste and class strata of society. However, there are many differences among the women workers in terms of cultural and social practices, as also in employers according to the region. The ways in which caste and patriarchy operate are very specific to different areas and need to be understood in diverse contexts. Thus the response to exploitation varies from culture to culture. Much of it is determined by internalisation of patriarchy and how the society has responded to any deviation from the norm. Therefore keeping this diversity in mind, networks need to be built up, good practices shared and information disseminated at the regional level. It is important to create a regional federation, for the state to act with responsibility and accountability. In fact, an idea was mooted to form a south level regional federation as socio-cultural realities including employers' mindset, as well as the urban design of cities and locations are almost similar across the south of India. It has been seen how location plays an important role in the acceptance of higher wages and better conditions for domestic workers. This regional level collaboration will also help to put pressure on the respective state governments.

### **6.1.3 National level**

The national level platforms are very important to lobby for domestic workers' issues with the topmost executive body of the Parliament. Even the lobbying, negotiations and struggles at the national level get more

attention mainly because it is the seat of the political rule. So campaigns need to start from the city, go on to the state, then to the region and finally to the national level; especially those campaigns that are backed by central laws, as well as related policy making bodies. The work on the national platform regarding legislation for domestic workers gets instant recognition pressure can be put on the highest levels of executive and judiciary. The ILO Convention, C 189 –Decent work is Domestic work, in 2011, can only get validity if the national governments ratify it. As India has not yet ratified the Convention, a strong legislation is still a distant dream. As far as implementation of Convention C 189 goes, the approach of all organisations should be to start lobbying at state levels with the members of Parliament in their constituencies, then gradually advocate for it in the states' assemblies, and then lobby at the Parliament level. The weapon of electoral demands and voting rights should be used strategically and effectively at both the state and national level elections.

## **6.2 Recommendations**

### **6.2.1 Direct Intervention**

As a part of perspective building on the agenda of workers' rights, the work that they do should be linked to collective struggles.

- Participatory and inclusive structure to be built up to involve the women at the slum level, so that ownership of the process is theirs. The level of inclusiveness and participation varies and therefore the recommendation is also different for different groups and cities.
- The government rather than the employer has to be seen as the major negotiator stakeholder.
- There should be a focus on creation and involvement of the employer forums and increasing awareness at the employers' level through stakeholders meetings and innovative practices like selfies with employers. The employments' engagement is also not a uniform action throughout the project areas and therefore this recommendation applies to the locations where this is missing.

The locations that already engage can evolve common, localised dialogues. It's necessary to build up forums for redressal or to adapt to a code of practice for employers.

- There should be structured processes put into place within unions/collectives to take up and respond to cases of women workers, be it domestic violence or cases related to wages, leave, allegations of theft or sexual harassment at the workplace. For instance it is important for all unions and organisations, to call for a legitimate enquiry process when a theft takes place in the work premises of a domestic worker along with third party arbitration.
- The existence of live-in workers ought to be acknowledged and work needs to be done to that effect, either through the RWAs or employers forums.
- Public hearings, protests, Mahila Melas, Counselling centres run by unions for issues related to domestic violence are some of the practices emerging from different organisations that could be deepened and explored by other organisations in their own context in order to strengthen their collective voice even while being responsive to individual issues.

### 6.2.2 Policy Advocacy

While there must be a consistent pressure lobby to build up a policy, it is more important to put a law into place.

- The perspective of women as workers has to be deeply internalised so that all negotiations with the government are focussed on redefining the home as work space/factory with the domestic workers as productive workers.
- Many small actions or mechanisms need to be put into place and their functionality should be demonstrated, to make more relevant inputs into policy and law. The concept of the WFC for instance should be strengthened not as a single window file clearance system, but as a vibrant mechanism for endorsing and implementing a policy.



Basically the framework of WFC should include database creation, information and accessibility to schemes and laws and grievance redressed mechanism.

- There should be more extensive documentation of cases at the workplace to help build up evidence based documentation to help engage in advocacy.
- Policy or legal advocacy is not enough, its implementation is the key. More efforts and attention need to be paid to the implementation and enforcement of minimum wages through filing of cases at the state level. The same goes with sexual harassment complaints at the domestic workers workplace. The Act has included domestic workers, yet the mechanism of the Local complaints committees has not yet been set up nor is it effectively functioning in many states. It is important to address this as the large population of vulnerable women workers urgently needs the right of safety and security at the workplace.
- The Trafficking of Persons Bill 2018 has been passed by the Lok Sabha, but there is an indication that the unions and collectives working with live-in workers need to utilise it or even get into source area information and tackle this forced labour trafficking.

### **6.2.3 Knowledge Creation**

Knowledge creation should be bottom upwards; in that it ought to be generated from the lived experiences of the domestic workers with local struggles and appropriate strategies should be built on the superstructure of information of laws and policies that are applicable to this sector. Different strategies need to be made to make them functional. This requires initiatives at different levels.

- Regular dissemination and sharing of information from one union to the other; small engagements and protests, exposure to documents, laws of government; sharing of best practices with other unions on how cases are to be handled and what processes need to be built

up for domestic workers in cases. These include cases of allegation of theft, legal processes, related laws under IPC and CrPc, sexual harassment cases and how to create a committee at workplace.

- Evidence based documentation and social media platforms would help to gather and disseminate knowledge base.
- Technology could also be put to creative use through WhatsApp groups, blogs and other interactive social media platforms that could reflect the voices, issues and experiences of domestic workers vis-a-vis strengthening their own internal communications as also with the public in general and the employers and labour departments in particular.

#### **6.2.4 Capacity Building**

The activists from the organisations working for the union need to represent the domestic workers. It would be advisable to have domestic workers themselves work as full time workers within the leadership of the organisation. Towards this there should be a concerted and holistic approach to capacity building within unions/collectives.

- Trainings should include more history of work, the domestic work sector and the various struggles.
- The training done over a period of time, in small groups, should include cultural inputs, as a large majority of domestic workers are women who are rooted in their diverse cultures and communities. This is also to reduce the caste and religious divides among women that could be exploited by larger divisive political forces. Topics that are political and cultural can be part of the meetings at all levels.
- Capacity is not built in a classroom, but through struggle and setbacks and betrayals received in the process of negotiating with authorities whom we think are our allies.
- More and more exposure is needed regarding the functioning of the government including the labour department apart from different and

powerful trade unions.

- As many opportunities as possible ought to be provided to take over leadership, at the local level as well as the national level.
- Additionally it is important to go beyond looking at women and girls as beneficiaries, and look at them as partners and participants in development. The classes held for the women and girls must incorporate a personality growth agenda, include empathy and sensitivity and the teachers themselves should be equipped with this understanding.

As stated by Harkesh Bugalia from the RMKU, "Our focus is not only on the dimension of 'labour' but on the entire human being. Women's emotional empowerment is important. The tools we use are not only the different laws related to labour and violence but also history. History of strong women and men is, for instance, part of the motivational bouquet through we which we build resistance."

### **6.2.5 Skill Training**

It is important to understand the concept and the context of this programme of skill training. Its introduction has to be in keeping with the concrete needs in an area. The chosen skills have to move from the traditional woman-centric skills to market oriented skills. Who sets the curriculum and what is the soft skills component is very important. Elements of assessment, monitoring, marketing as well as provision of loans have to be incorporated for sustainability. Feedback and assessment from both employers and employees in the domestic work sector is very important especially when the focus is on employability within the same sector, with enhanced incomes and dignity as RLHP has demonstrated.

### **6.2.6 Networking and Sharing**

One observation is that there is an immediate need to link up to, interact and debate with other domestic worker organisations at all levels. It is also important to link up with other democratic organisations and

movements, as all issues are interconnected. For example the PDS system and the Right to Food Campaign are issues for which not only activists but the women workers too can be active participants. They should be encouraged to become a part of campaigns that not only focus on the issues of domestic workers, but on those issues also where they learn or are included in governance. For example, they can become vigilance committee members or ward committee members. There should be a conscious effort to network with women's organisations to help build a linkage between the women's movement and the workers' movement. Domestic work is largely seen as a labour issue by the women's movement and sidelined by the mainstream labour movement, which is dominated by men who refuse to examine gender in the struggle for class equality. There is a need to share stories of women workers, inspirational stories, to actually recognise such women leaders in various projects, who can be role models for the rest.



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