



# REVERSING DOMESTIC WORKERS' RIGHTS: STORIES OF BACKLASH AND RESILIENCE IN DELHI



As a partner on the cross-country comparative action research project, **Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice** led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK, Gender at Work Consulting – India (GWCL) is working in close collaboration with the Shahri Mahila Kaamgar Union (SMKU – Urban Women Workers’ Union), New Delhi to bear witness, build knowledge and identify strategies to counter the backlash faced by domestic workers in India through engaged research, capacity building and dissemination.

As part of this work, this Storybook, **Reversing Domestic Workers’ Rights: Stories of Backlash and Resilience in Delhi**, highlights the worsening precarities experienced by domestic workers in the face of the pandemic and prolonged lockdowns. The stories have been collated by Chaitali Haldar with the support of SMKU. The Storybook has been designed and illustrated by Mrinalini Godara. It has also benefited from the work of an editorial team consisting of Swati Singh, Neha Kirpal, Kanaka Cadambi, Miriam Thangaraj and Rupa Krishnan.

We are grateful to the domestic workers who so generously offered us a window into their lives.

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For details of the project, see [counteringbacklash.org](https://counteringbacklash.org), and follow [@counterbacklash](https://twitter.com/counterbacklash) on Twitter

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**REVERSING DOMESTIC WORKERS' RIGHTS:**  
**Stories of Backlash and Resilience in Delhi**

# PREFACE

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines a ‘domestic worker’ as a person who carries out household work in or for private households in an employment relationship (ILO Convention 2011). ILO estimates that out of the total domestic workers, the vast majority are women who perform a range of activities in other households, such as washing utensils and clothes, cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, the elderly and patients. Domestic workers work as part-time, full-time or live-in workers in middle-income and high-income households.

A demographic analysis of domestic workers shows that they belong to poor socio-economic backgrounds and are mainly migrants. Women domestic workers are either sole earners for their families or

substantially support the household income (which is usually marginal). The majority of women domestic workers do not make it to minimum wage even after working in multiple households. Even when they do, it is after working tirelessly for 10-12 hours daily. Also, since private households are not recognised as formal working spaces or ‘establishments,’ domestic work is not regulated by any labour law, which makes them more susceptible to exploitation, denial of wages and unsafe working conditions. Domestic workers also often lack a collective voice as they are often not represented by a union or a worker collective.

While domestic workers continue to play a crucial role in the lives of middle-income and high-income families, their employment has always been characterised

by precarity, leaving them vulnerable to sudden job losses. The recent pandemic has exacerbated their challenges, pushing them deeper into the cycle of poverty and marginalization. While many individuals globally have managed to gradually restore their customary routines, work schedules, and social interactions in the three years following the pandemic, domestic workers face a markedly disparate reality. Many of them had lost jobs overnight during the pandemic with little to no support from their employers or the government and were forced to return to their hometowns or villages because it was impossible to sustain themselves in the metropolis. As restrictions began to ease post-pandemic and some of them returned to work, they found themselves being unfairly stigmatized as potential carriers of the Covid-19 virus. They were subjected to indignity and mistreatment by their employers and are now struggling to rebuild their lives.

This Storybook narrates stories of twelve women domestic workers from two

marginal locations of Delhi: Gautampuri – a resettlement colony in Badarpur on Mathura Road, and Faridabad – an informal settlement on the fringes of Delhi. Gautampuri was established between 1999 and 2000 when slum dwellers from different slum clusters were relocated here. It is home to migrants from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu who are mostly involved in informal and unorganised work, such as street vending, building and construction work, domestic work, and so on. Located in posh South Delhi, this colony lacks essential facilities, such as potable drinking water and basic sanitation.

The second location of the stories of women domestic workers in this Storybook is an informal settlement in Faridabad located several kilometres off the main road. The marginalised condition of this community is evident from the fact that it still lacks an accessible and constructed road to connect to the main city. This settlement is home to several migrant families from Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh who live here

in shanties. Domestic workers here work in nearby middle-income gated colonies in Faridabad and as live-in workers in different parts of Delhi.

Shahri Mahila Kamgaar Union (SMKU) is a union working towards collectivising domestic workers in these two colonies since 2005. SMKU has been working to empower domestic workers and raise awareness amongst them about their rights related to work and safety. It has worked closely with several live-in workers and has helped them leave behind exploitative working conditions, particularly related to sexual and physical exploitation. Based on the situations and contingencies, SMKU mediates with employers and sometimes takes up legal recourse for the rights and benefits of domestic workers. Further, SMKU works

with the families and children of domestic workers to assist them in securing education and livelihoods.

The purpose of Storybook is to shed light on the unheard stories of domestic workers that reveal their daily struggles. The stories of 12 domestic workers show how over the years, domestic workers have found themselves marginalised and vulnerable. Through these stories, we also hope to reinforce a conscious effort towards their collectivisation, demand for legislation and regulation for the rights and social security of domestic workers.

**Anita Kapoor**

Shahri Mahila Kaamgar Union

July 2023

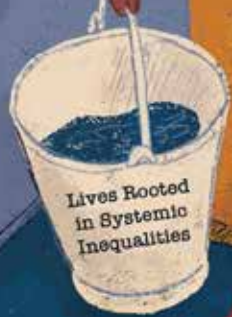
**Content warning:** *Some readers may find some stories in this storybook distressing. They deal with issues of physical and mental abuse, addiction, discrimination, Islamophobia, forced displacement, suicide, and financial distress.*

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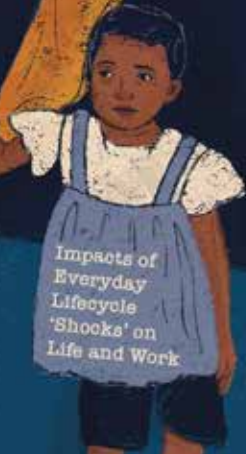
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Working Lives:  
Survival in the  
Face of  
Discrimination  
and Violence



Lives Rooted  
in Systemic  
Inequalities



Impacts of  
Everyday  
Lifecycle  
'Shocks' on  
Life and Work



Organising  
with SMKU:  
(Re)claiming  
Domestic  
Workers'  
Rights



The Pandemic as Backlash:  
Worsening Urban Precarities



Migration, Displacement and Debt





# INTRODUCTION

The paid domestic work sector in India is going through a period of crisis and upheaval with serious consequences for the rights of domestic workers.<sup>1</sup> Conditions of economic precarity and income insecurity have indeed characterised the lives of domestic workers for many years. However, the devastating impacts of the pandemic continue to reverberate in their lives, having increased their vulnerabilities and generating a clear backlash against domestic workers' rights. Moreover, like other informal women workers who live and work in precarious conditions, domestic workers have not only borne the brunt of the pandemic and pandemic-induced lockdowns but continue to face its impacts (Dewan 2022).

One of the reasons for the intense backlash being faced by domestic workers is the systemic inequalities that characterise the paid domestic work sector in India. Although the sector is one of the largest for women in urban areas (Raveendran and Vanek 2020), paid domestic work has been systematically undervalued and inadequately recognised as work by the state, society and employers. There are deep-seated reasons for this, including the highly gendered perception of domestic work as an extension of women's natural roles, and its performance in familial spaces (Sengupta and Sen 2013; Neetha 2013). Domestic work is also mainly undertaken by marginalised groups of women – it is a largely migrant

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<sup>1</sup> This introduction draws on a forthcoming paper by the authors, (Chigateri and Kundu forthcoming) as well as a Policy Map on Domestic Workers' Rights, which is on file with the authors.

workforce, there is a preponderance of Dalit and Adivasi women in domestic work, and a majority of domestic workers are women who have not completed primary education (Neetha 2013). Domestic work is, therefore, characterised by informality and precarity, with domestic workers experiencing poor working conditions as well as discrimination based on gender, caste, religion and migrant status. Additionally, key features of the living conditions of domestic workers include the vagaries and stresses of urban life lived on the margins as well as the inaccessibility of public services and resources (Mehrotra 2010).

### **ABOUT THE STORYBOOK**

This storybook, *Reversing Domestic Workers' Rights: Stories of Backlash and Resilience in Delhi*, which has been produced in close collaboration with the Shahri Mahila Kaamgar Union (SMKU – Urban Women Workers' Union), seeks to bear

witness to the backlash against the rights of domestic workers, particularly in the wake of the pandemic and pandemic-induced lockdowns. The storybook draws on glimpses into the lives of a range of domestic workers based in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR), including live-in and live-out domestic workers, who are both young and old, long-term and recent migrants, from Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim communities and so on. It seeks to make visible the quotidian forms of caste, religious as well as gendered discrimination and violence experienced by domestic workers, which were magnified during the pandemic.

As the storybook illustrates, domestic workers are experiencing a backlash in terms of a pushback against their rights and their struggles for their rights. This sense of going backwards has been expressed in terms of “10-20 saal peeche chale gaye” (“We have gone back 10-20 years”). This is a sector that has barely seen any gains on their rights as

workers.<sup>2</sup> There has been a systematic non-recognition of their rights across the country, despite persistent demands made by various domestic worker groups (Chigateri, Zaidi, and Ghosh 2016). The few exceptions where their rights have been recognised (such as the inclusion of domestic workers in minimum wage notifications in a few states, their inclusion as workers for welfare in some states, or the inclusion of households as a workplace under the sexual harassment law) serve as a reminder of just how limited the gains have been.

In the context of the pandemic and prolonged lockdowns, this sense of going backwards has taken a range of forms which are highlighted by each of the stories collated in the storybook. These include a devastating and widespread loss of livelihoods, increased work for those who remained or have since returned to work, decreased wages, and increased discrimination. It has also resulted in high economic vulnerability,

including increased indebtedness, food and housing insecurities, and worsening physical and mental health. In the wake of these troubling losses, domestic workers have suffered humiliations, indignities, and vilification at the hands of their employers and the state. They have been silenced and rendered powerless. Along with domestic worker organisations, such as SMKU, they have also experienced further reversals in their collective bargaining and negotiating power, which has set their struggles back by several years. It is in this sense that the pandemic has served as the ‘moment of revelation’ of the backlash experienced by domestic workers (Townsend-Bell 2020).

As the storybook painstakingly illustrates, the backlash experienced by domestic workers is built on a bedrock of systemic discrimination, marginalisation and myriad ‘microscapes of harm’ (Rowley 2020). Moreover, systemic injustices and violence that are rooted in caste and

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2 See for details, a Policy Map on Domestic Workers’ Rights, on file with the authors.

religious notions of 'purity and pollution' and experienced in forms such as 'untouchability' were heightened during the pandemic. Additionally, domestic workers have experienced everyday lifecycle events, such as marriage, divorce, illness, birth, death and migration as 'shocks'. Such events have required resets in already precarious contexts, just as the more systemic shocks of forced displacement, climate change and the pandemic have been experienced in terms of the 'spectacle of backlash' (Rowley 2020).

### ELABORATING ON THE 12 STORIES

Each of the 12<sup>3</sup> stories highlighted in this storybook situate the family histories of domestic workers as well as the social and economic milieu in which they currently live. This enables us to locate the systemic intersectional inequalities of age, location, class, caste, religion and gender that circumscribe their lives. It also provides us an account of the history of socio-economic

precarities in which their lives are embedded.

### Lives Rooted in Systemic Inequalities

Almost all the stories highlight that the early lives of domestic workers are constrained by disadvantage, insecurity and hardship. These are stories of early marriages, poor educational opportunities, and very early starts to working life and responsibilities in a context often circumscribed by economic distress. These are also stories of girls and women who come from mainly disadvantaged communities (Dalit, Adivasi or Muslim).

Women belonging to Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Classes communities in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh barely received any education due to the economic hardship faced by their families (see stories of Sundari, Shakuntala, Rani, Anita and Roopali). Married off at an early age, they were expected to shoulder household responsibilities and spend their lives in domestic labour. This

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3 The names of the 12 domestic workers have been changed to ensure privacy.

is also the case for women like Sangeeta and Pramila who belong to the Adivasi community in Jharkhand as well as for Saheba, Noor and Rabia who hail from Muslim families in Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. The youngest domestic worker in this set of stories, 19 year old Laksmi is a second-generation migrant. Born in Faridabad, she became a live-in domestic worker when she was only 13.

ven women who belong to privileged caste backgrounds, like Pushpa, face the same predicament. Like many others accounts in this Storybook, she was married early and subjected to domestic violence due to her husband's increasing alcoholism.

### **Impacts of Everyday Lifecycle Changes/ 'Shocks' on Life and Work**

The stories of domestic workers captured here also illustrate the impacts of everyday lifecycle changes/'shocks' in their lives, such as marriage, childbirth, illness and death. When such lifecycle changes occur in a context where domestic workers

barely have any safety nets, their lives are upturned, leading to further insecurities. When Sundari's father died, for instance, the burden of the household's responsibility fell on her mother's shoulders. As a result, Sundari had to stop her education when she was 12. At the age of 15, she was married. Roopali, Sundari and Sangeeta are battling not just the precarities that have heightened because of the pandemic; they are also battling indebtedness owing to the spiraling costs associated with their poor health or that of their family members.

The birth of children and childcare responsibilities have also had an impact on the working lives of domestic workers, either pushing them to work and/or leading to breaks and irregularity of employment. Economic insecurities, for example, drove Noor and Anita to start working soon after the birth of their children. Further, managing childcare responsibilities while carrying out live-in work is next to impossible. When Sangeeta returned to Delhi in search of work the last time, she was accompanied by her

young child and so, opted out of her usual stints of live-in work.

### **Migration, Displacement and Urban Precarities**

The stories also capture the itinerant, transitory and precarious nature of the lives of domestic workers as they move locations upon marriage, or between rural and urban contexts seeking livelihoods and security. For example, Rabia's story is one of migration to the city at an early age, relocation upon marriage, and then migration to the city again in search of employment and economic security (also see stories of Noor, Rani and Pushpa). The stories are also about the Delhi that resides on the margins of society and the state (Mehrotra 2010; Sheikh, Banda, and Mandelkern 2014).

The women who share glimpses into their lives come from locations in Delhi that typify this. Gautampuri is a resettlement colony; Badarpur on Mathura Road and Gadhakhori in Faridabad are informal settlements on the fringes of Delhi. The experiences of

urban life for domestic workers include too many stories of forcible displacement and relocation in the name of 'beautification' and 'creating a world class city'. As the stories of Sundari, Rabia, Saheba, Shakuntala and Roopali demonstrate, such displacement deepens already existing precarities of access to basic resources and services such as food security, housing, water and sanitation, transport, care and schooling for children, and so on. Each of these stories illustrates the havoc caused by displacement, of lives torn asunder, and of being uprooted from everything and everyone familiar. These are stories about lives having to be built all over again in ever more precarious contexts. For many women who have also experienced the dislocation and disruption of migration, this sense of being in a state of continual insecurity is even more acute.

### **Working Lives: Survival in the Face of Discrimination and Violence**

The stories capture the toiling lives of domestic workers, as they navigate poor

wages and working conditions. Across the board, the stories demonstrate the systemic devaluation of domestic work, which affects the wages that domestic workers can command. For example, over her working life of 16-17 years, Anita who started earning Rs. 400 a month now earns Rs. 6,000 a month, way below the current minimum wage of Rs. 18,993 a month for semi-skilled workers in Delhi (Labour Department, Government of NCT of Delhi n.d.). Apart from abysmally low wages, domestic workers also experience wage theft, as Sangeeta's story illustrates. For live-in workers like her, wage theft is not just by employers, but also by placement agencies.

These are also stories of the impacts of displacement on their working lives, for example, by increasing the distance from their workplaces as well as the prohibitive increase in the costs of their commutes (see the stories of Saheba and Roopali). The stories also highlight the impacts of poor working conditions. Roopali's story, for example, illustrates the agonising and ongoing

debilitating effects on both her physical and mental health after she suffered a head injury at her place of work. Poor conditions of work are especially exemplified by the stories of exploitation of live-in workers (see Lakshmi's, Sangeeta's and Pramila's stories) that are often characterised by unendingly long hours of work without rest, lack of mobility and, often, intrusive surveillance. The stories of Sangeeta and Pramila, both young Adivasi women from Jharkhand, reveal some of most horrifying experiences of exploitation and dehumanisation. There are also disturbing stories of workers facing discrimination owing to their gender, caste and religion (see for example, the stories of Roopali, Rani and Rabia).

However, there are also accounts of domestic workers who have shown remarkable strength and perseverance in overcoming seemingly insurmountable difficulties. For instance, Saheba's story is a testament to her strength and resilience in navigating relocation, job losses, and son's injury. She never gave up and always found

alternative ways to earn and save money and move ahead with her life. There are other stories too, of the patronage offered by employers, which have got domestic workers through the worst of the pandemic as well as the difficulties of daily life. Pushpa's story, for example, illustrates how acknowledging the need for leave during her kids' illness, compassion for the violence she faces in her life or support during the pandemic, can indeed offer a lifeline for domestic workers. However, domestic workers should expect these as their right rather than due to the 'decency' of their employers.

### **The Pandemic as Backlash: Worsening of Systemic Inequalities**

A key component of each of the stories is the backlash faced by domestic workers in terms of a reversal of rights in the wake of the pandemic and prolonged lockdowns. Almost all the stories highlight the devastating impacts of the widespread loss of livelihoods. The loss of wages resulted in harrowing increases in economic precarity.

This is manifested in terms of perilous food insecurities, loss of savings, increased indebtedness and downward spirals into poor physical and mental health. Anita's story highlights the specifically unjust implications of this slide into an ever more precarious existence. Not only did she lose her two jobs, the rest of the earning members of Anita's household – her husband and mother-in-law – too lost theirs. With four children to take care of, Anita is drowning in debt. She sees no clear path out of the situation, and this has taken a toll on her mental health.

Like Anita, Sundari too has not been able to get re-employed. This is both due to her age (she is now 56) as well as the changing demand for domestic work from 'khula'/open/ 'part-time' live-out work to 'full-time' live-in work. The inability to find employment because of this shift is replicated in the stories of other women too (see Noor and Roopali's stories). This increased work insecurity in a context of dire economic need has also seriously impinged



on the negotiating and bargaining powers of domestic workers. Noor's situation shows that she is willing to accept her employer's conditions, however unreasonable they may be, since her employer can easily find other women who are willing to take her place. For several domestic workers, this includes increased demands at work without an increase in wages (see Rabia's story, for example). For live-in domestic workers, the pandemic did not mean a loss of employment (unlike for live-out workers); rather it meant a worsening of working and living conditions. As Sangeeta's story highlights, she had to work through the pandemic even though she was ill (see also Lakshmi's story).

The stories also underline the heightened discrimination experienced by domestic workers, post pandemic. Having been vilified as 'carriers of diseases', they have suffered the dehumanising practices of 'untouchability'. They were offered different utensils to eat/drink from, which they did not necessarily experience previously (see Rani's story). Similarly, Roopali has had to deal with

prospective employers asking about her caste, which was not her experience before the pandemic. Rabia also talks about the increasing discrimination she has faced at work owing to rising Islamophobia in the country, which in her experience worsened post pandemic. Her story highlights how Muslims have been increasingly demonised, vilified, and dehumanised.

### **ORGANISING WITH SMKU: (RE) CLAIMING DOMESTIC WORKERS' RIGHTS**

Domestic worker organisations such as SMKU are facing immense challenges in contending with the backlash faced by domestic workers. These are mostly to do with the reduced bargaining and negotiating power of domestic workers as well as shifts in the sector with employers seeking more live-in, 'full-time' workers. Even so, as the storybook highlights, immediate relief efforts by organisations such as SMKU, like providing domestic workers ration or online benefits, have proved invaluable in the

critical months when domestic workers were facing perilous food insecurities. So many of the stories attest to this vital support offered by SMKU. Similarly, SMKU has provided a critical lifeline of solidarity and support for domestic workers. It is a space for domestic workers to share their stories and burdens. It has also given them a forum to come together and collectively re-strategise their claims and make efforts to contend with the backlash.

### CONCLUSION

The glimpses into the lives of domestic workers offered here provide ample evidence of the heightened levels of insecurity and precarity that they face. The pushback against the rights of domestic workers has come in a context where their rights are barely recognised. Even so, domestic workers' experience of backlash has been one of a worsening, or reversal, of even these rights.

As the storybook highlights, domestic

workers have experienced backlash within a wider context of the conditions of precarity, both in their working and living conditions. This has been through both pandemic induced exacerbation of vulnerabilities as well as in terms of the sustained inaction on the rights of domestic workers.

We believe that these stories of women domestic workers will contribute to an understanding of the backlash faced by them, including its nature, manifestations, and drivers. We also expect that it will help domestic worker organisations to identify appropriate strategies to counter the backlash. Along with a forthcoming Toolkit on Domestic Workers' Rights and Mobilising, we envisage that it will provide a resource for researchers and activists who are engaged in re(claiming) domestic workers' rights in Delhi and elsewhere.

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Gender at Work Consulting  
August 2023

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स्वीरामचंद्र खड्ग धर्मसाधनम्

एम्स →  
A.I.I.M.S



# RANI'S STORY

## *Resilience Amidst Recurring Adversity*

Rani was born in a small village in the Bijnor district of Uttar Pradesh, the youngest of six children in a Dalit family that could not afford to keep her in school. Instead, at 10 years old, she was sent to live with her maternal uncle in Delhi's Gautam Nagar locality. With an elder brother and his wife also in Delhi, Rani did not miss her family all that much. In fact, she was soon a favourite with one of the doctors at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences<sup>4</sup> (AIIMS) where her brother was employed in the kitchens. The doctor would often assure Rani that when she married, her future husband would be taken on in the AIIMS kitchens and Rani would be well-provided for. But when Rani eventually married at 18, her

parents were anxious to not embarrass her new husband; and no mention was made of a possible job at AIIMS.

Rani had married into a family that was as poor as her own. A year into the marriage, circumstances compelled the young couple to leave the village for Delhi in search of work. They headed to the Gautam Nagar slum where, thanks to Rani's brother, they were able to settle down without any of their new neighbours objecting. Soon Rani took on the job of a domestic worker to make ends meet.

### **FORCED DISPLACEMENT AND FINANCIAL DISTRESS**

In the beginning, it was hard going

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4 AIIMS is one of India's premier medical institute and teaching college.

## Reversing Domestic Workers' Rights

for Rani: the demands of domestic work were unfamiliar to her, often upsetting her employers. But Rani was determined to learn; and soon, she was taking on additional duties and earning enough to be able to send her son and daughter to school.

When city planning initiatives forcibly relocated the family from Gautam Nagar to Gautampuri, the displacement was a financial shock. Neither Rani nor her husband was employed any more, pushing the family into debt as they battled to survive. With their livelihoods gone, the children's education was also disrupted. The family struggled to access even basic facilities and was in dire straits.

Rani tried returning to her old employment in Gautam Nagar, but the travel proved expensive, only adding to her financial troubles. As Rani grappled with the situation, she wondered if time had turned back by fifteen or twenty years.

### SEPARATE PLATES SINCE THE PANDEMIC

With time, as Rani found work again,

the family began to stabilize in Gautampuri, their debts gradually lessening. But when the Covid-19 pandemic hit and lockdowns were announced, any hard-won stability was quickly shattered. Once again, Rani and her husband found themselves without work. As the family coffers ran dry, the children's education came to a complete halt. There came a time when the family could not even afford two square meals a day. There was no support forthcoming from her employers, despite Rani's dire need, leaving the family to fend for itself.

With their savings completely exhausted, SMKU threw them a lifeline, stepping in to organize essential rations so Rani and her family could tide over the worst of times.

Currently, 45 years old, Rani works in two households. She tires more easily these days, with her blood pressure issues flaring from time to time. In fact, her overall physical condition is poor; but her financial worries are too compelling for Rani to find a respite from working. Adding to her physical woes is the change in the attitudes

## Rani's Story

of her employers that Rani has noticed since the pandemic. The people in the houses she works in appear to hold people like her, living in the slums, responsible for the spread of diseases like Covid-19. Their relations are no longer marked by the affection and respect of a pre-pandemic time. Instead, Rani is held at distance by her employers who even insist that she eat or drink in utensils marked and set aside for her. Rani finds such separation distressing, feeling ostracized and discriminated against.

***But Rani cannot express her distress – she is painfully aware of her family's financial circumstances, and must simply endure her employers' actions even when she believes in the dignity of her work. The fact that she earns a low wage does not mean she can be disrespected.***

As she grows older, Rani finds her work increasingly physically challenging. But she cannot be picky about who she works for or how much they pay; she must take whatever comes her way before her body gives in. While her children are doing well in their studies, she remains concerned about how long she will be able to support their education. The chronic impact of various displacements and disease have left her feeling uncertain.

Indeed, Rani may appear stoic about it all, but the toll of such distresses on her body is easy to see. But the thought of a brighter future for her children keeps her going. A thought she holds onto it as hard as she can, trusting that someday, everything will be all right.



LOOKING FOR A  
HINDU  
MAID

→  
SMKU

NEWS: MLA CALLS  
MUSLIMS, COVID  
SPREADERS.

INCREASE IN  
COMMUNAL  
VIOLENCE





# RABIA'S STORY

## *Enduring the Bitterness of Religious Discrimination*

Rabia is a domestic worker in the rich neighbourhood of Green Park in Delhi, and has been for over a decade now. Born in a village in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal, she first moved to the city as a child when her parents, like so many others, moved to Delhi for better opportunities. Initially, they engaged in scrap collection work; but soon, Rabia's mother took up domestic work to help meet the family's needs. At 17, Rabia returned to her village to be married; but with few livelihood opportunities locally available, she and her husband also made the decision to seek their future in Delhi. Rabia's parents, meanwhile, like so many others in their Gautam Nagar slum, had been forcibly relocated by city authorities to Gautampuri. And it was there, in Gautampuri, near her parents, that Rabia

decided to settle down and start a family.

Married life in Delhi was good to Rabia, at least at the start. Her husband was gainfully employed as a rickshaw puller; and soon, the family grew, with three children added to their number. But when her husband developed alcohol dependence, family life was thrown into disarray. It fell to Rabia to turn things around; and to raise their three children and make ends meet, she, like her mother before her, took up domestic work. Commuting daily from Gautampuri to Green Park, Rabia began to work for several affluent households in the area. Gradually, Rabia's life improved and she began to feel hopeful – only for the Covid-19 pandemic to strike, leading to a whole new set of struggles for Rabia and her family to face.

### RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION REARS UP IN THE LOCKDOWN

Rabia's husband passed away before the lockdown began; and, to mark the loss, she travelled to her village to observe a two-month period of mourning (iddat). Once back in Delhi, she sold her husband's rickshaw to arrange her daughter's wedding. Even so, she found herself spiralling into debt as she struggled to pay for the marriage expenses. New work opportunities were hard to come by, especially during the Covid-19 lockdowns. While a few of her employers had offered some financial assistance at the start of the lockdown, this soon stopped, leaving Rabia with no income or opportunity to work. It was during those difficult days that Rabia sought help from SMKU, who supplied free ration that helped her tide over the worst of the crisis. When the lockdown was finally lifted, Rabia resumed work in the two households where she had been previously employed.

But relations at work had unexpectedly and distressingly shifted over the lockdown.

One of the home-owners began to taunt Rabia over her religion as a Muslim, even suggesting that all Muslims should leave India for Pakistan. If there was a derogatory news item on TV about Muslims, her employer made sure that Rabia watched, much to her dismay. Rabia began to feel angry and helpless about the situation – she had never experienced anything like it before nor imagined it was possible.

Despite the pain and hurt – and even fear – such discrimination caused, Rabia's financial poverty left her little choice but to continue working, even as she worried about the state of Hindu-Muslim relations in the country. Afraid that communal riots were being stoked she often fretted about what would become of her and her family. Fear and uncertainty filled her, even as she tried to go about her work as usual.

*“My employer would often say  
'Muslims should go to Pakistan'”*

Rabia's distress grew as the house-owner made it more and more obvious she favoured

## Rabia's Story

the Hindu domestic workers in her employ. When guests arrived or her employer hosted a party or gathering, Rabia's workload increased significantly – yet, she was neither compensated for her labour nor even given any of the leftovers that her Hindu fellow-workers received.

***Rabia could see that her employer was taking advantage of her compulsion for work; but being ignored and set apart felt worse.***

The employer who asked after the welfare of Hindu domestic workers or shared her food with them, had no kind word or gesture for Rabia. Disheartened by such discriminatory treatment, Rabia made the difficult decision to quit. For ten years, she had worked hard, putting up with a bigger workload for the same pay – Rabia

struggled to come to terms with the fact that her loyalty was not reciprocated. All because she was Muslim. Even thinking about it disturbed her deeply.

As a Muslim, it proved difficult for Rabia to find a new job in the locality.

***She often feels like the clock has turned back ten years.***

When Rabia had left her village for Delhi, she had hoped to build a good life for her family. But the Covid-19 pandemic not only wrecked her means of providing for her family, it brought her face-to-face with the harsh reality of religious discrimination. Despite ten years of dedicated service, her employer could not see past Rabia's Muslim identity but mistreated her for it. That such discrimination could fester during these modern times is nothing short of a calamitous regression.



JUNE '23

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# ROOPALI'S STORY

## *Strong Mothers, Daughters and Domestic Workers*

**3**5 year old Roopali has been employed as a domestic worker in Delhi since she was 15. Hailing from a migrant Balmiki (Scheduled Caste/Dalit) family from Badaun district in Uttar Pradesh, she grew up with three brothers and a sister in Delhi. Both her parents worked to support the family: her father as a safai karamchari (sanitation worker) and her mother as a domestic worker.

Roopali's parents had migrated to Delhi, a long time ago, in search of work and better opportunities. Her mother often recounts the story of arriving in Delhi, only to live in a broken-down bus for the first years, next to a garbage dump in Andrew's Ganj. In those days, they eked out a living by salvaging metal and reselling scrap. When the family later

moved to a slum in Gautamnagar, Roopali was born, followed soon by a younger sibling. It was in Gautamnagar that Roopali's mother began to work as a domestic worker, in the wealthy Delhi neighbourhood of South Extension. Her father too found work, in an office, as Roopali started school. But soon, tragedy befell, as her father suddenly passed away.

***"My family situation deteriorated badly when my father died. This was a time of deep sorrow for us. But my mother did not let us lose our heads, nor did she lose her own. She took care of herself and us."***

### DEMOLISHING A SLUM – AND UPROOTING LIVES

Even as Roopali's mother bravely shouldered all the responsibility, Delhi had another horrible shock in store: the slum they lived in Gaumtamnagar was marked for demolition. Roopali was 12 years old at the time and studying in class 5, when the family was forcibly relocated in Gautampuri.

The displacement was painful for the family. Not only did they have to come to terms with the destruction of the shack they had put up over many years, but also the life and community they had built in Gautamnagar. Those bonds of solidarity and friendship, so carefully woven together over the years, were ripped apart in a moment.

Instead, they were miles from their work and reduced to living by the railway line with nothing over their heads but a tarpaulin sheet in the cold of December. After several months, once money changed hands to cut through bureaucratic red tape, the family was able to secure a plot of land. But unlike the slum in Gaumtamnagar, there was no

access to basic services here, not even water and electricity. It was a difficult adjustment, for the children as well, whose education was disrupted as it took time to get the transfer certificate in place. For Roopali's mother, it was now a hard daily commute of some 20 kms to work every day.

In the midst of all this upheaval, one of Roopali's brothers suggested she discontinue her education to work and support the family. This was not what Roopali's mother had wanted for her daughter, but soon, given the family's dire circumstances, 15 year old Roopali found herself accompanying her mother to work in South Extension. That year, Roopali married for love; but when the marriage turned violent, Roopali was back with her mother within two years, her young son with her. Remarrying later, Roopali's son is 18 years old now and her daughter, 9 goes to school.

### THE HAZARDS OF DOMESTIC WORK

One day, when Roopali was mopping floors at work, a sharp object above the

## Roopali's Story

CCTV overhead fell on her. Bleeding profusely from the gash on her head, Roopali lost consciousness and was rushed to the hospital by her employers. While they had her injury treated at significant expense, Roopali struggles with chronic pain as a result of the physical trauma. She has also been let go off since by the employer. Another time, working while running a high temperature, Roopali fainted at work. When her employer took her to a clinic nearby, Roopali was diagnosed with gastrointestinal problems and high blood pressure. Her medical costs have skyrocketed since.

### CHRONIC CYCLES OF VULNERABILITY

*“Prior to Covid, discrimination against domestic workers was prevalent in the houses where we worked, but no one asked what their caste was. But now, if we go to find work, caste is the first thing that is asked.”*

*Where do you live? Which caste are you?* Such questions are often asked of domestic workers. Sometimes, additional restrictions are imposed: if you clean the bathroom, you must not cook. While these conditions rankle, workers are forced to put up with them in a post-Covid landscape of limited opportunities.

*“How can one secure employment if there are no jobs available?”*

Roopali is no longer employed in the three households where she worked in pre-pandemic times. Even her current job as a cleaner for Rs. 4,000 is temporary. Post-Covid, employers are increasingly looking for ‘full-time’ live-in domestic workers. Live-in work is out of reach for women like Roopali with families to look after.

*“I feel distressed. Sometimes I feel defeated by life's circumstances.”*

As Roopali manages her poor health, she also worries about all the demands on her meagre income: the household expenses, her medicines, and the children's education. While her husband recently found a job that pays Rs. 10,000 a month, much of that is earmarked for paying off their loans. Roopali desperately wants to take up additional work – but ill-health prevents her, adding to her worries and, in turn, only rendering her more susceptible to illness—a constant, self-reinforcing cycle of vulnerability.

### HOPE IN A TIME OF COVID

It was during the Covid-19 pandemic that Roopali learned about the Union. SMKU not only supplied much-needed rations for the family, the SMKU-run information centre also helped Roopali gain a 'ration card' that allowed access to the public distribution system. In the midst of life's disappointments and defeats, Roopali takes comfort and courage from her participation in union activities. Her face glows as she shares her joys with her worker compatriots, especially when she is able to offer help to another in need.







# SUNDARI'S STORY

## *A Domestic Worker's Life of Unrelenting Struggle in the City*

Sundari hails from a small village in the Madhubani district of Bihar, where she lived with her parents, two sisters and a brother. Her parents, who were from one of the so-called backward castes, worked as labourers, working hard to make ends meet. The financial strain on the household meant that Sundari could only study till the fifth grade. Tragedy struck when Sundari's father passed away unexpectedly, forever altering the course of their lives. Sundari was married off at 15 – when other children were still in school, she was already caring for an entire household.

### **STRUGGLES IN THE CITY**

When Sundari was 20 years old, a devastating flood ravaged their village,

destroying the family home. With the family livelihood also washed away, Sundari and her husband were left with no choice but to leave for the city of Delhi, to make a fresh start.

**With three children to bring up – two daughters and a son – Sundari quickly realised that the family could not survive in the big city on her husband's earnings alone, meagre as they were.**

To bring in much-needed income, Sundari took up work sweeping floors and washing dishes for well-to-do families in the neighbourhood. When the family later moved to Gautam Nagar, another residential

## Reversing Domestic Workers' Rights

locality in Delhi, Sundari continued to clean houses. The work was not steady, however; and she was often stuck in a cycle of finding jobs only to lose them before desperately looking for a new one again.

However, worse was in store for Sundari and her family. When city authorities announced beautification plans for the locality, their life in Gautam Nagar was thrown into a tumult. The slum they lived in was deemed unfit; and, between 1999 and 2000, it was demolished, uprooting scores of families like Sundari's. Relocated to Gautampuri, the forced displacement upended their lives once again, severing their support networks and disrupting the children's lives – schools in the area refused to admit them without appropriate identity documents. For Sundari herself, finding work – especially in new and unfamiliar surroundings – was proving a challenge. The family's hard-won sense of stability, as fragile as it was, was shattered once again, as precarity and uncertainty gripped their lives.

When, at long last, Sundari secured a job

as a cook in a local household, she suffered another setback – her leg was injured at work. Her employer may have helped to pay for some of the treatment, but Sundari was left in the lurch when her employment was abruptly terminated.

### COVID-19 COMPOUNDS THE PROBLEMS

**When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, Sundari was 56 years old – and, despite a lifetime of hardship, it proved an unprecedented challenge for her and her family.**

The jobs that had helped them eke out a living were no longer to be found, no matter how hard Sundari tried. If households did not turn her away for being too old to work for them, they insisted she was vaccinated. Sundari's precarious finances were further hit by her husband's worsening health. Their son, meanwhile, having quit his promising job to become a rickshaw driver instead, developed a drink and drug habit that

## Sundari's Story

rendered the family even more vulnerable. Not only did he neglect his own young family, he failed to submit the forms required for Sundari and her husband to claim their old-age pensions.

**With no work and no access to state entitlements, the pandemic pushed Sundari further into a chronic financial crisis.**

### **SUNDARI'S STRUGGLES REMAIN UNRELENTING**

In the throes of the pandemic, Sundari found desperately-needed support, thanks to the domestic workers' rights organization, SMKU. The ration supplies and cooked meals, in particular, secured by the Union, proved a lifeline for Sundari.

In 2022, when Sundari found employment as a cleaner at a private school in Badarpur, her hopes were all too quickly dashed – the school principal had no qualms about making unreasonable demands of her at will. Sundari often dreamed of leaving

her job – only to find that the image of her ailing husband stayed her. How else would they pay for his medicines? Her financial precarity left her little choice.

After Sundari's difficult, reluctant stint at the private school eventually came to an end, her husband's health deteriorated significantly. Sundari spent long hours by his side in the hospital as he underwent dialysis. With the medical bills mounting, debt piled up, and the couple struggled to even feed themselves. Despite a lifetime of hard work, there was no relief nor rest for Sundari from the relentless struggle to survive.

From the devastating floods that washed away her village home, to the forced displacement brought on by city-planners; from the chronic ill-health of her husband to the bitter disappointment of a son's irresponsibility, uncertainty and adversity have dogged Sundari's journey at every step. Even as she weathers storm after financial storm, yet another one appears to lurk just round the corner, threatening once again to blow Sundari's life off course.



SMKLU

SMKLU  
RATIONS

# PUSHPA'S STORY

*Raising a family while battling domestic violence and economic hardships*

Originally from Bhagalpur district in Bihar, Pushpa's family moved to Gautampuri in Delhi years ago, in search of better employment opportunities. Despite being born into a Brahmin family with moderate means of income, Pushpa was married off to a man from Chandigarh at the age of 17. He worked as a camera operator for a film shooting company.

In the early days of her marriage, Pushpa faced significant financial problems - sometimes they didn't even have enough food to eat at her in-law's home. The birth of her first daughter only added to the pressures she faced. In the meantime, her husband found a job in Delhi, which provided some financial relief. After a couple of years, Pushpa's parents arranged a house

for her in a settlement near Gautampuri, freeing her from her in-laws' household and giving her the hope of a fresh start. However, amidst these changes, a troubling situation developed as her husband became addicted to alcohol.

## PUSHPA EXPERIENCES DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND STRUGGLES TO SUPPORT HER FAMILY

As her husband's drinking problem worsened, Pushpa's life took a dark turn and she became a victim of domestic violence. Initially, she remained silent, hoping that her husband would improve over time, but that didn't happen.

*"This silence became my millstone – weighing me down."*

At first, she believed that her husband's toxic behaviour was driven by the fact that she had borne only daughters. She longed for a son and gave birth to four daughters hoping that a son would be born and that this would improve her family life. However, even after her son was born, her husband's behaviour remained unchanged.

***"While he found happiness in his own world, I devoted my life to our children."***

After the birth of their third daughter, Pushpa was left with no choice but to seek paid work to provide for her children. With the help of a neighbour, she found employment as a cook in Badarpur, earning a meagre Rs. 1,500 for her efforts. But Pushpa's decision to work outside the home angered her husband. Moreover, her neighbours made insinuations about her character which added fuel to the fire. As disagreements between them escalated and her domestic situation continued to deteriorate, she had

no option but to leave her children with her parents while she continued to work.

Meanwhile, her husband failed to contribute financially to the household though he changed jobs and became a driver. Pushpa now had to shoulder the responsibility of raising her son and four daughters by herself. To provide for her family, she began working as a cook in two households, earning a meagre income of Rs. 6,500. Despite her best efforts, running the household on this income was extremely challenging, and Pushpa often found herself borrowing money from her parents to make ends meet.

Pushpa's eldest child is currently studying in Class IX, while her youngest is yet to start school. She works hard, preparing breakfast and meals in 2-3 houses, to support her children. However, raising them solely on her earnings remains an ongoing challenge. She wants to take on additional work to earn a higher income and provide a brighter future for her children. Unfortunately, better opportunities come with their own set of



problems. Longer working hours (12-hour shifts) or jobs located far away would offer better pay, but Pushpa cannot leave her young children with no one to care for them.

When the Covid lockdown hit, Pushpa lost her job as a cook, adding to her already stressful situation. Rations provided by their school helped sustain her children during these challenging times, and SMKU also provided valuable assistance with rations on two occasions. However, all her savings were eventually exhausted trying to meet her family's needs.

As the Covid situation gradually improved, Pushpa found new jobs. Fortunately, her current employers are quite understanding and supportive. During a challenging period when her son fell ill with jaundice, her employer not only offered help but also granted her leave from work to attend to her child. Her husband's behaviour also improved during the lockdown as he didn't have access to alcohol during this period. However, as soon restrictions were eased, he reverted to his problematic ways.

### **SMKU GIVES COURAGE AND COMFORT IN THE MIDST OF STRUGGLES**

31 year old Pushpa holds on to the hope that her circumstances will improve. Struggling with domestic violence, Pushpa strives to secure a brighter future for her children. Her brightest hope is that her children won't have to endure the same struggles that she has faced in her life. In this challenging journey, she often experiences feelings of loneliness and exhaustion.

Amidst her struggles, SMKU provides solace and support to Pushpa. Joining this organisation not only granted her access to ration but also empowered her with information, a union card, and the courage to stand against the violence she faced. Pushpa has now taken on the role of connecting other women with the Union, aiming to disseminate vital information and strengthen the Union's functioning. Although her husband disapproves of her association with the Union, Pushpa considers it her sanctuary, where she finds inner strength and a sense of belonging.



SMKU  
SAVINGS  
GROUP

COVID  
IMPACTS

SAVING

# SAHEBA'S STORY

## *Fortitude on Life's Rollercoaster*

Saheba, originally from Kanpur district in Uttar Pradesh, now lives in Delhi's Gautampuri Colony. As a child, growing up in a family of three girls and one boy, their financial situation was modest at best. As only her brother was allowed to go to school, Saheba went no further than the first grade; and when she turned 18, her marriage was arranged to a young man from the same village. Working as an auto-rickshaw driver, the income that Saheba's husband brought in was often inadequate; and even with a brother-in-law selling vegetables in Delhi, Saheba's new family often faced economic hardship.

Over time, as their finances continued to flounder and sustenance became a challenge, the decision was made to follow her brother-in-law to Delhi. But relations

were strained between the brothers – there was no help forthcoming, and it was up to Saheba and her husband to make it to the city. As they scrambled to find a way, it was Saheba's prudence that saved the day and paid her husband's way: the Rs. 90 she had assiduously put away by cutting down on expenses now covered his fare to Delhi.

### **EVICTION UPENDS SAHEBA'S LIFE**

After sometime, Saheba and her father-in-law joined the brothers in Delhi. Soon however, tensions rose in the household; and within six months, Saheba and her husband had decided to move out. They found a shanty for rent nearby, where they were later joined by her father-in-law. Resourceful and thrifty as ever, Saheba continued to save up till, five or six years later, she was able to buy

## Reversing Domestic Workers' Rights

a small shanty for Rs. 13,000. In that time, the family had grown as well, with Saheba now the proud mother of three sons and daughter. But Saheba's joy turned to sorrow when her daughter fell ill, not long after she was born – every last rupee of savings went towards her care. Right in the middle of the crisis arrived a notice of eviction from the city authorities: all of Gautam Nagar's slums were to be relocated to Gautampuri. Saheba couldn't help wondering if all the arrows of fate were lined up against her.

In 1998, when Saheba and her family were forcibly displaced to Gautampuri, they were rendered homeless in an instant. With nowhere to go, she and her four children spent several days and nights in the open fields of Gautampuri. To buy a plot of land in the new locality, Saheba borrowed Rs. 7,000. She had no choice – the children needed a roof over their heads – and it marked the beginning of a mounting burden of debt. A new shanty required construction materials beyond her means, even as Saheba's daughter's medical expenses continued to climb. Bereft of her

support networks in Gautam Nagar, Saheba's plight only worsened when her husband turned to alcohol, setting off a cycle of domestic violence.

### **SAHEBA'S RESOURCEFULNESS AND RESOLVE KEEPS THE FAMILY AFLOAT**

Confronted with financial hardship and family breakdown, Saheba resolved to find work. One day, accompanied by a woman she knew, she ventured into Defense Colony, one of Delhi's up-market residential areas, in search of a job. Saheba had never considered employment before – indeed, stepping out of her home for work was a strange and overwhelming thought for her, only made worse by the reality of going from door to door, trying to find a position. Eventually, she found work sweeping, mopping, and cleaning the dishes in one of the households. Although the pay was low, her employer was kind, showing consideration for Saheba's hardship and making for a pleasant working environment. Saheba even opened a bank account with her employer's help.

## Saheba's Story

Over time, as Saheba found more work, her income rose to Rs. 25,000 a month. In 2003, Saheba joined SMKU and began contributing to the women's savings fund they operated and, over the next two decades, she diligently put aside some money into the fund each month for a rainy day.

Slowly, Saheba saw life improving. While her husband's addiction remained a problem, the family managed to build their own home. Saheba opted for sterilisation, but after the operation, she began experiencing various health issues, including swelling and constant fatigue. From time to time, her daughter assisted her at work; and, when she married, Saheba's daughter-in-law stepped up, taking over some of her domestic work duties. When the Covid-19 pandemic threatened to upset this hard-won balance – working in others' homes was no longer allowed during lockdowns – Saheba decided to set up her own vegetable shop. Gradually, the shop

began generating a decent income, while the ration assistance she received from SMKU sustained the family in the difficult moments.

Saheba has seen much in her life, many ups and downs, both physical and emotional. Just when she felt life was improving, an unexpected shock would set her back by years.

**All the same, she has faced these challenges with resolve and wisdom, navigating her family through difficult times.**

Despite a modest income, she saves diligently, embracing new opportunities when old ones closed down. Displacement, disease, debt and a global pandemic may all have had Saheba in their sights – but Saheba's steely resolve and pragmatic resourcefulness have kept her family going and growing through it all.



INCREASING UNEMPLOYMENT DUE TO COVID

JOB LOSS

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS DURING LOCKDOWN

SAVINGS

# ANITA'S STORY

## *Braving Unemployment in The Post-Covid Era*

Anita, belonging to the Valmiki (Dalit) community, hails from the Badaun district of Uttar Pradesh. She grew up in a poor family with five brothers and two sisters. To support the family, Anita's father worked as a domestic worker in Mumbai. Since his meagre salary was their sole source of income, she was not able to pursue an education and was married off at the age of 17.

After her marriage, she moved to Gautampuri Basti in Delhi to live with her in-laws who were no strangers to financial instability or insecurity. Anita's in-laws initially lived in Gautam Nagar before they were displaced and had to move to Gautampuri. While her father-in-law was battling a chronic disease, her husband worked as a drain cleaner and her

mother-in-law as a domestic worker. In an effort to supplement her family's income, Anita also began working as a domestic worker. However, when her brother-in-law got married, circumstances changed and Anita began to live separately from her in-laws. As a result, she and her mother-in-law found themselves working in different places. Anita's job involved sweeping, mopping, and doing the dishes for two rooms. Initially, her salary ranged from Rs. 400 to Rs. 500. Over the course of seventeen to eighteen years, her income gradually increased to Rs. 6,000. Her employers were also quite considerate. In between, she had to quit working for a while due to health issues caused by the birth of her child though her mother-in-law helped her find another job in time.

**ANITA FACES AN ECONOMIC CRISIS**

With the onset of Covid-19, Anita faced the spectre of unemployment again - one of her employers moved to the US, while the other one asked her to stop working altogether. During this challenging period, SMKU provided crucial support by providing rations, which brought much-needed relief to her family. Meanwhile, Anita's husband too was unable to find any work, which added to their financial strain.

***"The lockdown brought a lot of difficulties. It became a struggle to get even basic necessities like food and water at home. Now, we have a lot of debt."***

Even after Covid-19 restrictions eased, Anita struggled to find work.

***"I'm not finding any work. The response is always a no."***

After the Covid pandemic, the opportunities for part-time work have diminished significantly. The majority of available jobs were geared towards live-in workers, requiring round-the-clock availability, which is challenging for individuals with family responsibilities and children to care for.

***"The work that is available is for 24-hours. How can those with families and children manage to work around the clock?"***

While her husband eventually found a job as a driver, his boss treated him badly, and this caused additional stress. The family's savings were also completely wiped out during the pandemic, exacerbating their financial hardships. The immense mental stress experienced by her husband and their precarious financial situation heightened tensions within Anita's family, due to which



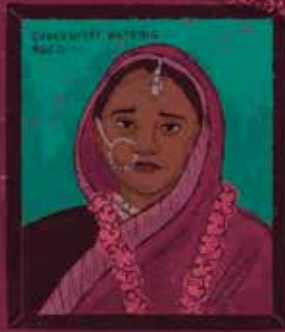
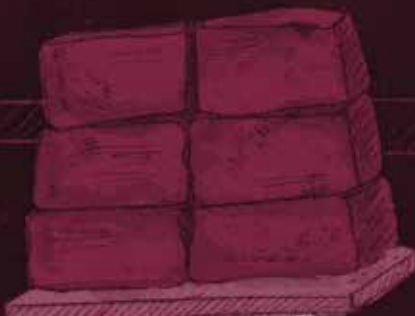
## Anita's Story

she experienced emotional breakdowns. Even to this day, Anita and her family have not fully recovered from the impact of the pandemic. And her family continues to live in a desperate financial situation.

At the age of 35, Anita is willing to undertake any work to support her family, including working as a drain cleaner. Though her husband earns Rs. 12,000, a significant portion of his income goes towards repaying their house loan. When they took the loan, Anita thought that their combined earnings would help them repay it. She had never in her worst nightmares anticipated the unemployment brought about by Covid-19 and the consequent financial crisis that they have had to endure. To make matters worse,

her mother-in-law also lost her job during this period, leaving them without family support. The financial strain caused by the pandemic continues to affect the family's ability to manage their expenses to the extent that it could impact the next generation, as the cost of her children's education has become an increasingly difficult burden for Anita to bear.

With debts amounting to lakhs of rupees, Anita and her family find themselves adrift, unsure of which direction to take. With their financial situation casting a shadow over her children's future, Anita feels increasingly disheartened about their family's ability to escape the cycle of poverty and instability that they're caught in.



# SHAKUNTALA'S STORY

## *Heartbreaking Journey of Loss and Survival*

Shakuntala, a resident of Gautampuri, Delhi, was born into a labourer's family in Pratapgarh district of Uttar Pradesh. She was the youngest of five sisters and five brothers. Tragically, all her siblings succumbed to chickenpox. Due to the prevailing belief that educating girls was not important, Shakuntala was not allowed to attend school. Her parents arranged her marriage at the age of 12, hoping that a move to her in-laws' house would ensure her survival.

### **A YOUNG BRIDE**

It was five years after her marriage that

Shakuntala shifted to her in-laws' home after the "gauna" ceremony<sup>5</sup>. She had to take care of the family and manage household chores at a very young age. Unfortunately, her new home was rife with constant conflicts, and she was treated poorly. Her sister-in-law would often scold her and dole out tiny portions of essential supplies, such as soap or oil, for her use.

Shakuntala's self-confidence was shattered, and the situation only worsened after the birth of her son. Her husband had to move to Delhi for work, leaving Shakuntala and her newborn to face mistreatment at her in-laws' home. She and her child had

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<sup>5</sup> The gauna ceremony indicates the start of marital life and the consummation of the marriage, particularly in the context of child marriage, where often the husband and the wife do not live together till a particular age is reached.

to be content with rationed milk and food. Frustrated with her situation, she decided to move to Delhi with her 2 year old son and rented a house in the Nizamuddin area of Delhi. Her husband worked at the Delhi High Court, earning Rs. 400 per month.

### SHATTERING LOSS OF HUSBAND AND SON

In 2003, Shakuntala and her family faced displacement, moving from Nizamuddin to Gautampuri. This transition turned into a nightmare for Shakuntala. Here, they had to take shelter in a makeshift hut constructed from polythene sheets as they did not have enough money to build a proper home. However, tragedy put out its tentacles, crippling an already weary woman: she lost her husband in 2012. With no breadwinner in the family, Shakuntala could afford to educate her eldest son only up to the twelfth grade, leaving the family staring at an uncertain future.

In 2013, Shakuntala arranged the marriage of her eldest son, but the following

year another catastrophe struck when her son passed away. This heart-wrenching loss left Shakuntala utterly shattered; for two years, she merely existed, with her senses numbed and her very soul torn apart by grief. The people around her provided some food and assistance that enabled the family to survive. However, the education of the children came to a complete halt. Her 15 year old son started earning to support his mother and two sisters. Shakuntala was deeply saddened by the fact that her son had to start working at such a young age.

### FINDING COURAGE AND COMFORT IN THE UNION

Shakuntala tried to make ends meet as a manual labourer in the construction sector. However, she struggled to find steady employment as a manual labourer, and turned to domestic work. Her first job was in South Extension, a prominent neighbourhood in Delhi, where she earned a meagre Rs. 1,000 per month. However, the workload was overwhelming, and the pay

## Shakuntala's Story

was insufficient; she eventually quit the job.

Later, she managed to secure a job as a cleaner in a company in Faridabad, bringing home a higher wage of Rs. 6,000. Despite her desire to continue, the prevailing pandemic and health concerns forced her to abandon that job too.

***Shakuntala is now 50, but the responsibilities of running the family and her relentless struggles with abject poverty have left an indelible mark. She is ageing rapidly and looks at least ten years older. Her battles with life have left her with a profound sense of uncertainty about what lies around the corner.***

At her age, Shakuntala has realised that working as a domestic worker might no longer be feasible and yet she needs a stable income. Presently, the household is being sustained through her son's earnings of Rs. 10,000.

Shakuntala's journey commenced with an early marriage laden with responsibilities, accompanied by heartaches, losses and struggles that persist to this day. However, she has found strength and courage in her association with SMKU. Observing the resilience of other members has instilled in her the determination to face life's challenges and contribute positively, painting a brighter outlook for her future.



# LAKSHMI'S STORY

## *Battling hardships: Lakshmi's journey from a minor domestic worker*

Lakshmi, a 19 year old, was born in the Faridabad district of Haryana. She comes from a poor family belonging to the blacksmith caste and is the youngest among her four sisters and brother. Originally from Jharkhand, her parents had migrated to Faridabad in search of employment and found work as stone breakers. When Lakshmi was very young, her father abandoned them, and her mother then became a construction worker to support the family. Though her father returned after a few years, he was an alcoholic and was often violent. This created an unsafe family environment; frequent conflicts had become a part of their daily lives. Despite her challenging family environment, Lakshmi managed to study up to the sixth grade with assistance from

one of the community organisers in SMKU. However, due to the family's financial situation and escalating conflicts, she was unable to continue her education beyond that point.

### **UNSTEADY WORK AND DIFFICULT CONDITIONS**

Being aware of the family's situation, Lakshmi's aunt had arranged for her to work as a domestic worker so that she could help support her family financially. At the age of 13, a minor herself, Lakshmi was asked to take care of a child. Thus began her journey as a domestic worker. She worked as a live-in worker and received a monthly payment of Rs. 6,000. Unfortunately, after about a year and a half, the family moved away, and

## Reversing Domestic Workers' Rights

Lakshmi lost that job. But she had picked up valuable skills in housework, which helped her get another job in no time. She found a new 24-hour job in another household in an affluent residential community in Faridabad where she was paid Rs. 10,000 per month. But she had to leave this position too after a while due to problems with her eyesight.

Lakshmi then found a new opportunity where she worked as a babysitter and handled dusting. This job also required her to be available 24/7, and she received a monthly payment of Rs. 10,000. She worked long hours, from five in the morning until nine at night. But what made her uneasy was the extensive camera surveillance throughout the house, which allowed her employer to constantly monitor her every move. Although she was only supposed to do some light dusting and take care of the child, her employer promptly gave her additional work whenever she tried to take a break. She was even expected to work when she wasn't feeling well.

Her employer was controlling in other

ways as well. Lakshmi and two other domestic workers were expected to eat from a single plate. The plates and water bottles used by the domestic workers had to be kept separate from the ones used by her employers. A separate bathroom was also designated for the use of the domestic workers. Lakshmi found these rules of her employer as well as the constant surveillance to be quite peculiar and unsettling.

### **EXTRA WORK WITHOUT ADDITIONAL PAY OR BENEFITS**

From the age of 13 to 19, Lakshmi worked in approximately five different households. Reflecting on her work experience, she shares that employers often initially offer a lighter workload, only to gradually increase their responsibilities without providing any additional compensation. And because her family needed the money, Lakshmi has never had the freedom to negotiate much about her salary or working conditions. Moreover, her employers dictated much of her life while



## Lakshmi's Story

she lived with them. For instance, coming from a region where rice is a staple, Lakshmi has a preference for rice. However, she felt hesitant to express this to her employer and didn't feel like she could ask for rice during her meals.

### **LAKSHMI DREAMS OF A BETTER LIFE**

Currently, Lakshmi is unemployed and actively searching for a part-time job so that she can learn tailoring while continuing to work. She wants to acquire this skill for her personal growth and development. She doesn't want a full-time job that requires her to work round-the-clock anymore as feels that she does not get any rest as a live-in-worker and that has impacted her health. Fortunately, her brother is now employed in a private sector company and is shouldering the responsibility of the family's expenses. Her father also does not fight as much. This positive change in the family's circumstances has provided Lakshmi with some relief and hope for a brighter future.

Lakshmi has had a long-standing association with SMKU since her childhood. This affiliation proved to be beneficial for her during the Covid pandemic, as she received ration support. Attending the union's meetings provides her with valuable information and advice, bolstering her courage to handle significant responsibilities despite her young age. Due to her association with the organization, she is aware of the rights of the workers and understands issues that may affect the lives of domestic workers, such as sexual harassment.

Due to financial limitations and a difficult family situation, she had to forgo her studies and start working as a domestic worker. The challenges and responsibilities she faced at a young age matured her, making her responsible and wise beyond her years. Her determination to improve her circumstances remains constant as she strives to find a better future. The extent of her success will be influenced by the circumstances she faces in her journey ahead.



# NOOR'S STORY

## *Lost in Transition: Struggling to Survive in the Post-Covid Job Market*

Noor is from a Muslim family in the Malda district of Bengal and currently works as a domestic worker in Faridabad<sup>6</sup>. Tragically, she lost her mother to an illness when she was about 3 years old and her father remarried soon afterwards. Her father supported the family by working as a rickshaw driver but since they were poor, Noor was not able to study beyond grade 1.

At the age of approximately 9, Noor moved in with her aunt's daughter-in-law in Badarpur (an area in South East Delhi) for three years before returning to her village. Three years later, at the age of 15, she got

married. Her in-laws lived in the Gadakhora area in Faridabad.

A couple of years after getting married, at the age of 17, Noor gave birth to her first child, a son. Two years later, she welcomed a daughter into the family. Currently, she is the mother of two sons and a daughter. Unfortunately, her daughter, who is now 12, is paralysed and unable to walk.

To support her family financially, Noor began working as a domestic worker a couple of years after her daughter's birth. This decision was prompted by her husband's alcohol addiction, which made it challenging for the family to rely solely on his income.

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<sup>6</sup> Faridabad is located in the Delhi National Capital Region and is the most populous city in Haryana, a state in northern India

She found a job in an apartment in one of the new multi-storied apartment complexes in Faridabad. Her employer was kind and offered her work that involved cleaning utensils, sweeping and mopping the floors, for which she earned Rs. 1,800 per month. As time went on, she found additional jobs, gradually leading to an improvement in her family's overall condition.

### UNEMPLOYMENT AND FINANCIAL STRESS BROUGHT ON BY COVID

Noor's employer left the area shortly before the Covid lockdown began leaving her with no income during the lockdown period. Fortunately, the ration provided by SMKU offered considerable relief during this challenging time. Noor's family depended on daily wages and had no savings to fall back on. Therefore, to meet other expenses, she had to take multiple loans, which she is still in the process of repaying. As a result, this period was particularly daunting for them, and simply ensuring the family's survival became a major challenge in itself.

### THE POST-COVID JOB MARKET CONTINUES TO BE CHALLENGING

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic subsiding, Noor continues to grapple with many challenges in finding employment as job opportunities have significantly reduced. Nowadays, many households prefer to hire domestic workers who are available round-the-clock-24/7, which is not feasible for Noor due to her family commitments. Moreover, caring for her disabled daughter demands her constant attention, making it impractical for her to work as a live-in domestic worker. What's more, in the current job market, employers dictate the wages, leaving little room for negotiation. If someone declines their offer, they can easily find someone else to fill the position. Given her family's economic condition, Noor is compelled to accept any work, even if it is low paying, to provide for her family and make sure her children have a better future.

### **NOOR CONTINUES TO LOOK FOR JOBS**

Currently, Noor is working in a household where she receives Rs. 3,000 per month. This meagre income makes it difficult for her to support her family, leading her to seek additional work. Meanwhile, Noor's husband is not able to secure jobs regularly as a labourer, and he is seeking additional work in a college. Although he contributes to the food expenses of the family, he spends a considerable portion of his income on alcohol. Noor bears the burden of all other financial responsibilities by herself.

So far, Noor has been fortunate as far as her employers are considerate. She has never faced any ill-treatment from them. The apartment complexes that she worked in always provided separate toilet facilities for domestic workers, and she often received

meals during work hours. Notwithstanding these positive experiences, Noor still grapples with financial difficulties, largely due to her husband's drinking problem and the current state of the labour market. The equation between the employer and the employee seems to have been fundamentally altered -- part-time job opportunities are scarce, and there is an abundance of job seekers, resulting in a downward pressure on wages. Moreover, the lack of government schools in the vicinity has deprived her children of access to even basic education.

In these trying times, SMKU has been a source of solace for Noor. Whenever possible, she attends the organisation's meetings, gaining valuable information and strength from the workers' collective.



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# SANGEETA'S STORY

## *Quiet Determination Amid Inhuman Treatment*

Sangeeta, an Adivasi girl from the Simdega district of Jharkhand, grew up witnessing the hardships of poverty in her village. Being one of nine siblings, Sangeeta's education was discontinued after the second grade. When she was twelve, enticed by the promise of earning money, she and two of her friends secretly set off for Delhi without informing their families. She arrived in Delhi with stars in her eyes and big dreams of escaping poverty. However, the agent who had promised the girls that their lives would transform brought her to Kotla Mubarakpur, a neighbourhood in Delhi, and placed her as a live-in worker in a household.

### **EXPERIENCING INHUMANE TREATMENT**

Sangeeta found employment in a bungalow in Mayur Vihar, an affluent

residential area in East Delhi. Her employer was an astrologer. His wife was a teacher and they had a college-going son. Sangeeta's work hours spanned from 5 am to 8 pm: she was responsible for all household chores, including sweeping, mopping and dishwashing.

Once she completed her morning duties, she was confined to the balcony of the house until 5 pm. The balcony was exposed on all sides. All she had was a drain to relieve herself and some plastic bags for defecation. To preserve her dignity, Sangeeta covered herself with a sheet. Even in the scorching summer of Delhi, she had only that thin sheet to shield herself from the sun, which, paradoxically, generates more heat.

In the beginning, Sangeeta's tasks were limited to sweeping, mopping and

dishwashing. However, after a few days, she picked up some cooking skills, and soon she found herself being dumped with the additional job of cooking, though her salary remained the same. She also had to give the agency a 10 % cut of her meagre income of Rs. 9,000. Whenever the agent came to collect the money, the lady of the house would lock Sangeeta in the bathroom and thus ensure that they never met.

Compounding the issue was the fact that Sangeeta was provided with leftover food from the son's plate. Though initially diffident and afraid, Sangeeta eventually mustered the courage to speak to her employer: "Please don't give me leftover food. We came here from our village to sustain ourselves. We are not dogs to eat discarded or stale food."

### FEELING UNSAFE AND INSECURE IN THE CITY

If you thought she had hit rock bottom, there was worse to follow. The landlord's son started summoning her to his room in his parents' absence. Every time he called her

to his room, he would start playing porn films on his computer. She began to feel unsafe and soon sought permission from the landlady to go back home. She was shocked by the response—a tight slap.

After about one and a half years, Sangeeta decided to quit her job and only received two months' salary from her employer. When she went to the office to collect the remaining salary, she was given Rs. 1,500 in a ten-rupee note bundle. At first, she was elated because it looked like a lot of money. It was only after counting the same that she realised that she had been duped.

Sangeeta's first job in Delhi turned out to be a nightmare. Unfortunately, this kind of inhumane treatment repeated itself in every job that followed. She felt she had no other option but to rely on agencies to find employment and stoically carried on with her life in Delhi. Sangeeta's attempts to break free from the poverty trap drove her into the clutches of an unscrupulous placement agency. Raising her voice against the treatment meted out to her only meant



going back to the embrace of poverty.

In spite of everything that she faced and endured, Sangeeta managed to set aside Rs. 3,000 per month, which she invested in one of the small savings scheme plans. She thus painstakingly saved nearly one lakh rupees. However, one fine day, she discovered that she had lost her entire investment. Undeterred, she continued to save and, along with her husband's contribution, even managed to build a house in her village.

### **THE PANDEMIC: A MAJOR SETBACK**

The Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a severe blow for Sangeeta, and she is still struggling to overcome its impact. At that time, she worked as live-in maid at a house in Gurgaon, a financial and technology hub situated just southwest of New Delhi. Everyone in her employer's family contracted Covid-19, and Sangeeta also fell ill. Just as her health began to improve, she received distressing news about her husband's deteriorating health, and she had to use all her earnings towards his treatment.

### **SANGEETA FINDS STRENGTH IN THE UNION**

Sangeeta joined the Union four years ago. At that time, SMKU had supported her in securing payment for work completed. Through her association with the Union, she became aware of her rights as a domestic worker. Now, whenever a fellow domestic worker faces challenges, she extends help to them. Sangeeta also assists other girls and women in finding domestic work in the city. For instance, she recently secured a well-paying live-in job and recommended another woman for the part-time job that she previously had.

In her new job, Sangeeta earns a monthly salary of Rs. 14,000 and enjoys two days off. During these days, she dedicates her time to working with the organisation. It is quite evident that Sangeeta's affiliation with SMKU has empowered her significantly, and she is committed to giving back to the Union.



# PRAMILA'S STORY

## *Escaping inhuman treatment*

Pramila comes from a Christian Adivasi family in East India. Her life took a drastic turn when her father set off for Andaman in search of work and, subsequently abandoned his family and got married to another woman. Soon after, Pramila's mother, along with her four children, returned to her maternal home, and that's where she grew up, in her maternal grandmother's house in the Khunti district of Jharkhand. Her mother was determined to provide for her children and started farming to support the family. She worked hard and ensured that her eldest son received an education up to matriculation. However, Pramila's dreams of getting an education evaporated when she was in the sixth standard and her elder brother took the decision to take her out of school to help

care for their grandmother at home. To make matters worse, one day her younger brother got upset over not getting the Rs. 50 that he'd asked for, and in a fit of anger, he left home for Delhi.

### **PRAMILA BECOMES A WITNESS TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING AS SHE SEARCHES FOR HER BROTHER**

In 2003, when Pramila was 12 or 13, she came to Delhi with a placement agent who was from her village. She knew that she needed money to survive in the city while she looked for her brother. The placement agency's office was located in Punjabi Bagh, and she stayed with them for several months, trying to locate him.

During her stay, she noticed something disturbing about the agency. Young girls

were being bought and sold there. Deeply disturbed by what she witnessed, Pramila made it clear to the agency people that she wasn't there for such kind of work; she had come to Delhi to find her brother.

### **PRAMILA BEGINS HER JOURNEY AS A DOMESTIC WORKER**

Afterwards, Pramila was placed in a household as a live-in domestic worker. Her daily tasks included sweeping, cleaning utensils, and dusting.

*Initially, she often found herself in tears, homesick, and profoundly lonely.*

Fortunately, her employer was kind and taught Pramila how to cook. However, though she was promised a monthly salary of Rs. 1,200, after working for a year, the agency handed her a meagre sum of Rs. 6,000. Moreover, before leaving this job, she entrusted an agent from her village with Rs.

3,000 to send back home, which her family never received. This left her feeling angry and disheartened. She talked to other girls at the agency and eventually decided to return to her village.

A few months later, Pramila returned to Delhi with the assistance of another agency and began working in Mukherjee Nagar, a neighbourhood in northern Delhi. She had a positive experience in this household. Moreover, she was finally reunited with her brother during this time.

### **PRAMILA IS ABUSED AND EXPLOITED AS A DOMESTIC WORKER**

Following her previous work, Pramila found a job in Panchkula, Chandigarh, which was arranged for her by another placement agency. Initially, everything seemed to be going well. But soon her employer started picking fights with her. To make matters worse, she would physically assault Pramila and then instigate her dog to bite her. She even had to get the rabies vaccine subsequently. Her employer even

went to the extent of locking Pramila in the bathroom after each incident of abuse. As a result of this physical abuse and cruelty, her menstrual cycle stopped, and her face and body became swollen.

Pramila was living in an unbearably suffocating environment.

***Despite contemplating escape many times, it seemed impossible for her to get away from this oppressive environment.***

The overwhelming despair that she felt drove her to consider suicide. Eventually, she managed to extricate herself from that job, but the experience has taken a severe toll on her mental health. To this day, Pramila bears visible scars from the dog bites she endured during that dreadful period of her life.

After 2015, Pramila decided to stop relying on agencies for work and began searching for employment opportunities

with her sister-in-law. Eventually, she found a job but faced the same issue of not receiving proper payment for her work after a few months. In an effort to secure a more stable income, she accepted a 12-hour work shift in a household where she took care of an elderly woman. When the Covid pandemic struck, the position converted to that of a live-in worker who had to provide care for the woman 24/7. Despite these constraints, she was comfortable working there as she was given all the facilities she needed and received a salary of Rs. 11,000. Moreover, the atmosphere was pleasant and the family that she worked for was kind and understanding. However, after four years, the elderly lady that she was caring for passed away, and Pramila lost that job.

But she soon managed to secure another 12-hour job elsewhere. However, she was once again faced with a hostile and challenging work environment. Her employer would give her leftover or discarded food to eat, and she had to endure constant scolding. This took a toll on her

health and affected her blood pressure till, eventually, she was left with no choice but to quit the job.

At the age of 30, Pramila currently works as a live-out worker, a situation that she is happy with. However, when asked about her future plans, Pramila becomes emotional and tearfully expresses her desire to build a house and devote her life to God. Due to family concerns and the painful experiences that she has endured, marriage was never an option for her, and now, she no longer desires it.

***“I have to build a house and spend my life with God. There is a lot of family concern, so never thought about marriage, and now there is no desire.”***

Having gone through many devastating experiences in life, Pramila's mental well-being has gradually been affected by feelings of helplessness. Despite her difficult circumstances, she took the proactive step of joining SMKU. And she not only shares information about the union with other women but also connects them to it and extends her support to them.

**Gender at Work Consulting Pvt Ltd (GWCL)** is a social enterprise based in India. Their aim is to collaborate with feminist movement actors, including researchers, non-profit organisations, the private sector and international institutions, to bring about gender transformative changes. They undertake both analysis and action, premised on the idea of feminist inquiry and intersectional principles. GWCL aims to bridge theory and practice in ways that nurture collective understanding and shift discriminatory social norms.

**Shahri Mahila Kaamgar Union (SMKU)** is an unregistered organisation representing the workers of unorganised sector in Delhi. They work in particular with women domestic workers, demanding the right to life, dignity of labour and decent work.

