

# Realising our Rights:

A HANDBOOK ON MOBILISING DOMESTIC WORKERS





# Realising our Rights: A Handbook on Mobilising Domestic Workers

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# Preface

This handbook is an effort to support the mobilisation of domestic workers. It brings together lessons learned and insights gained over the decades into an actionable toolkit drawing on the lived experiences of domestic workers. Through this handbook, we hope to take a step towards building youth leadership from among the communities fighting for the rights of domestic workers and the legal recognition of their rights. We also hope that this handbook will serve as a resource for various domestic worker groups who continue to fight for rights and dignity. We believe that their demands, over which the struggle continues today, are extremely fundamental and urgent as highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis.

The catastrophe of the pandemic has revealed two important aspects regarding the labour of domestic workers. First, how important this work is for the maintenance of daily life in the society and second, that the workers in this sector are deprived of their basic rights. This is evident in how deeply devalued and marginalized they are. On the one hand, the labour of domestic workers has proven vital in ensuring the continued well-being and subsistence of households and families in society during the COVID-19 crisis. On the other, during the pandemic, domestic workers suffered immensely in the form of loss of both their lives and livelihoods as well as exploitation of their labour. Additionally, the intense struggle for survival during this crisis has directly harmed the workers' movement in the region, affecting their bargaining power, ability to organize for better working conditions and to push for legal reforms. Through this handbook, we hope to counter the devastating impact of COVID-19 on domestic workers and provide a path forward for stronger organizing for worker rights in this sector.

Comprising 5 detailed modules on key topics related to domestic work, this handbook provides activities and instructions to train leaders in the various nuances of issues related to this sector.

Beginning with a discussion on defining domestic work, the various modules of this handbook will provide participants with an overview of the sector, including the socio-demographic contexts and lived experiences of workers, the gender-based discrimination and challenges they face in their demands for recognition, the legal provisions that regulate this sector, and gaps therein. We encourage you to join the discussion. Through engaging with this handbook in your communities, we can advance the discussion on the role of domestic workers' collectives and the need for developing feminist leadership in this sector. The handbook focuses on active participation and engagement. It includes a variety of activities and exercises to ease the challenges of organizing workers and to negotiate the intricacies and strategies of working in this sector.

We hope this handbook will help domestic worker leaders articulate their concerns and advance the conversation about both the opportunities and challenges of organizing workers within this movement.

*Anita Kapoor, Shehri Mahila Kamgar Union (Urban Women Workers' Union), New Delhi*

# Introduction

- Purpose of the handbook: To build a leadership cohort that supports the collectivisation of domestic workers
- Who is it meant for? Domestic worker groups, individual facilitators, and other organisations working to strengthen the capacities and collectivisation of domestic workers

This handbook builds on the long history of domestic workers' organising in India and globally, and seeks to contribute to ongoing struggles for recognition, dignity, and rights. It is not a substitute for organising, but a resource to support and strengthen it. This handbook is premised on the understanding that organising domestic workers is critical for advancing the rights of domestic workers and enabling them to challenge the everyday injustices they face. It recognises that many of the issues surfaced in the handbook are not isolated experiences but shared realities that can be transformed through collective action.

It has been created with the objective of preparing leaders, particularly young people, from within the sector and who are directly connected with the community to take up and strengthen the struggle for their rights. In other words, the handbook has been designed with the intent of creating a strong cohort of leaders who organise domestic workers. While it brings together information on the range of issues faced by domestic workers drawing on their lived realities, it also places emphasis on the processes of consciousness raising – with the intent of making the process creative and interesting enough to inspire behavioural change amongst aspiring leaders. The handbook, therefore, draws on participatory and feminist pedagogical approaches that centre lived experience, collective reflection, and dialogue.

Rather than positioning domestic workers as passive recipients of information, the sessions are designed to surface their knowledge, build shared analysis, and strengthen confidence to act collectively.

Several of the sessions have been piloted with domestic workers through Shehri Mahila Kaamgaar Union (SMKU), and the modules have been further strengthened and refined based on participant feedback as well as an evolving understanding of domestic workers' needs and aspirations. While each module can be used independently, together they offer a cumulative pathway for building awareness, solidarity, and collective leadership. Users are encouraged to adapt the handbook to their context and select sessions that are most relevant to their context.

The handbook is organised into five modules, each combining thematic content with practical exercises and stories drawn from lived experiences. In addition, some basic information on each topic is provided as reference material, which can be incorporated by the facilitator into their discussion. Together, these elements are designed to support facilitators in translating key concepts into engaging training sessions. Instructions for conducting each exercise and discussion points are provided. We hope that this guide will enable facilitators to create a learning process that is more meaningful, responsive and effective.

## TIPS FOR FACILITATORS:

- It is essential for the facilitator to prepare in advance for these exercises and to review and reflect on the session afterwards.
- The facilitator has a special responsibility to create a safe environment during the sessions, so that participants can overcome feelings of fear, shame, and hesitation and participate fully.
- The facilitator should avoid taking sides or categorizing any idea as simply right or wrong, as this will prevent participants from openly expressing their thoughts and perspectives.
- Encourage participants to share their personal experiences openly and refrain from commenting on or criticizing them. Share your own experiences with the group as well – this will create an atmosphere of openness.
- Avoid conducting overly long sessions during the training. If a topic becomes lengthy, provide a short break afterward. After lunch, be sure to include an energizing game or song; this increases both interest and attention during the training.
- Encourage quieter participants to speak more and participate so that everyone has equal participation in the sessions.
- Always conduct the sessions as a two-way dialogue. Both the subject matter and people's experiences are important in the training, so maintaining a balance between the two is essential for effective training.
- During discussions in the sessions, try to give equal weight to opposing views to facilitate open discussion. New ideas cannot emerge until old ideas are challenged and changed.
- The facilitator's behaviour is very important, so be flexible, tactful, cooperative, and friendly. It is our role to demonstrate this behaviour both during and outside of the training sessions.
- If a co-facilitator is present during the training, assign them the task of writing down the discussions, experiences, and stories (after obtaining permission) from the sessions so that they can be included in the final report.
- Facilitators are encouraged to adapt the sessions to the comfort, readiness, and realities of participants, and to create spaces of trust and mutual support.
- By keeping the above points in mind, we can make the handbook an interesting learning process and bring about positive changes in people's lives.

MODULE 1:

# What is Domestic Work and Who is a Domestic Worker?





The objective of this module/lesson is to build an understanding of

- what constitutes domestic work
- who performs domestic work
- the role of domestic workers in society and how domestic work is valued
- the range of work performed by domestic workers
- the nature of the workplace and
- the diversity of work arrangements that domestic workers have

The module is divided into 4 sessions and the total time required for the module is 9.5 hours

## SESSION 1:

# Introduction and What is Domestic Work?

### Purpose:

- To introduce the participants to each other
- To understand participant expectations from the session
- To come to a shared understanding of what is domestic work and
- To understand the role played by domestic workers in society

There are 2 exercises for this session.

## EXERCISE 1.1: WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS, AND EXPECTATIONS

*Time required: 30 minutes*

### Process:

- Begin by welcoming all participants and conducting introductions. Each participant shares their name and if they have an affiliation with any organisation/ collective/ union.
- This helps create a comfortable atmosphere and enables participants to get to know each other.
- Introduce the topic in simple terms and ask participants about their expectations from the session.
- To gather expectations, form pairs and ask questions. Allow 10 minutes for discussion.
- Expectations can be written on cards or shared verbally.
- Link the expectations shared by participants to the objectives listed above and explain the objectives in detail so that everyone's focus remains on the topic.

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

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- If the topic is not clearly explained, expectations may not be articulated properly.
- Opening activities are very useful in setting the tone; conduct them carefully and thoughtfully.

## EXERCISE 1.2: BREAKOUT GROUPS AND PLENARY DISCUSSION

*Time required:* 1 hour

*Material required:* Charts, Colour Marker, Meta Cards, Tape

*Process:* Give each participant a meta-card with colour markers and ask them to take 10-15 minutes to write their responses to two questions: 'what is domestic work' and 'how does domestic work contribute to society?' Divide the group into smaller groups and ask them to discuss their understanding with each other. Ask each group to present their discussion to the whole group. Identify commonalities and air any opposing views. Also address missing/outstanding issues and come to a shared understanding in response to the two questions. Please refer to Box 1 as required.

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

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- It is important to ensure that participants' views and voices are heard in open discussion so that the facilitator has a clear view of the understanding of the participants from the start
- Open discussion is useful to gain information as well as to develop perspectives
- While adding the missing or new dimensions, make your point only by connecting them with the emerging points.

## BOX 1: WHAT IS DOMESTIC WORK? AN OVERVIEW

Paid domestic work is work that is performed mainly by marginalised groups of women in (primarily urban) private households. It is a form of unorganised/informal work, viz., work that is carried out in the unorganised/informal sector which is characterised by the lack of contracts, regulated working conditions and social security.

The work performed by domestic workers includes a range of (often ill-defined) tasks comprising sweeping, swabbing, dusting, washing clothes and dishes, ironing and folding clothes, watering the plants, fetching water and fuel, shopping and cooking, caring for children and the elderly and the disabled as well as pets. This could include tasks such as massaging and oiling hair, feeding children, getting children ready for school, walking the dogs and so on.

Domestic work is understood as an extension of ‘women’s natural roles’ requiring little skill because of which it is both insufficiently recognised as work and is an undervalued form of work.

Domestic work is essential and necessary work without which society cannot function. The work performed by domestic workers contributes to the economy – domestic workers enable their employers to work and given the poor wages of domestic workers, they subsidise the work of their employers. In this sense, domestic work is both valuable work as well as work that is characterised by exploitation and discrimination.

The domestic work sector has grown over the last several decades driven by the supply of cheap labour in a context of distress

migration fuelled by an agrarian crisis as well as an increased demand for domestic work propelled by changes in family structures, the aging of populations, and increases in the number of women working outside the home.

In the coming sessions and modules, we will delve deeper into each of these aspects of domestic work – who performs domestic work, what constitutes domestic work, the value placed on domestic work, the nature of the employment relations, how to define domestic work, the conditions under which it is performed, the issues faced by different categories of domestic workers, the legal aspects of the regulation (or lack thereof) of domestic work. The latter modules of this handbook examine the question of ‘what is to be done’ – it focuses on legal rights, the processes of mobilising and organising domestic workers and the strength and solidarity that comes from collective action.

See for details:

WIEGO, [Domestic Workers](#).

Neetha, N., (2017a). [Nuances and Overtones of Paid Domestic Work in India. Women’s Work in South Asia in the Age of Neo-liberalism](#).

# Who performs domestic work?: Socio-demographic Profiles of Domestic Workers

Purpose:

- To reflect on the socio-economic contexts and profiles of domestic workers
- To understand how these inform the value placed on domestic work

## EXERCISE 2.1: MAPPING DOMESTIC WORKERS

*Time required:* 1 hour

*Material required:* Charts, Colour Marker, Meta Cards, Tape

*Process:* Distribute 5 cards to each participant. Ask them to think of 5 domestic workers that they know, including themselves. On each card, ask participants to write down the following characteristics that they know of each of them: their gender, their age, caste, religion, migrant status, marital status. After this process, ask them to place their cards on the wall and begin a clustering process based on 2-3 shared characteristics, for e.g., gender, age, caste and so on. Ask them to collectively reflect on the patterns that emerge? What are the characteristics of the participants in the room? Is this information different for live-in and live-out domestic workers?

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS

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- Draw on the information in Box 2 (below) to engage the group on patterns that the cards may not have directly dealt with – for example, the states that they may have migrated from
- Engage the group on whether the patterns that emerge from the participants reflect the data drawn from studies in the sector and why this maybe so
- If there is a divergence from the data, engage with the participants about why this maybe so

## BOX 2: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES OF DOMESTIC WORKERS

Since the 1990s, there has been an increase in the numbers of domestic workers in the country – driven by wider macroeconomic factors, including distress migration from rural areas, the rising demands for a workforce to reduce the double burdens of middle-class women, and the rising aspirations of the middle class to withdraw from domestic work.

Over the decades, there has also been an increasing feminisation of domestic work – domestic work is a largely feminised workforce with domestic work being performed predominantly by women. In other words, domestic work is a gender segregated workforce, and it reflects a gendered division of labour (women mainly perform what are considered ‘women’s jobs’ of cleaning, cooking and so on).

Domestic work is also a predominantly urban sector of employment, with domestic work constituting one of the largest sectors of work for women in urban India. Most domestic workers in cities such as Delhi for example, are domestic workers from states such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

There is a preponderance of Dalit and OBC women in domestic work and the labour performed by domestic workers is embedded in a caste-based division of labour, and caste-based discriminatory practices of pollution and purity. The work of cleaning in particular is considered impure and the people performing it are considered impure themselves, despite them literally cleaning spaces and things for others.

The socio-demographic profiles of domestic workers are different for different categories of workers – live-in and live-out workers. Young Adivasi women and girls predominate in live-in domestic work, with a significant prevalence of child labour in live-in domestic work. On the other hand, live-out domestic workers are mainly older Dalit and OBC women. In terms of age and marital status related demographic characteristics for live-out domestic workers, over 50 percent are in the age group 25-44, and over 40 percent are in the 45-55+ category. Studies also indicate that a majority of domestic workers are currently married, followed by widowed/divorced/deserted women. Moreover, domestic workers are predominantly women who have not completed secondary education.

See for details:

Neetha N, 2009, *Contours of Domestic Service*, IDWFED.

ILO, 2015, [Indispensable yet Unprotected](#), ILO.

Moghe, 2018, [Domestic Workers](#), Working Paper No.9, Action Research on Women’s Labour Migration in India, CWDS.

Raveendran and Vanek, 2020, [Informal Workers in India, A Statistical Profile](#), WIEGO.

## SESSION 3:

# What does a domestic worker do and how is this work valued?

### Purpose:

- To reflect on the range of work/diversity of tasks that domestic workers perform
- To understand the value of domestic workers to employers, the society and the state

There are 4 exercises provided for this session.

## EXERCISE 3.1 META CARD EXERCISE ON THE 3 CS

*Time required:* 90 minutes

*Material required:* Charts, Colour Marker, Meta Cards, Tape

*Process:* Give each participant two cards. Ask them to write/illustrate two of the most important work they do as domestic workers, one on each card. After 10 minutes, ask participants to arrange each card on the wall into each of these 3 categories: Cooking, Cleaning and (direct) Care Work. Collectively reflect on each of the categories to highlight the range of tasks that domestic workers perform as well as how invaluable the work is with the following questions as guide:

- Are some tasks more valuable than others? If so, why may that be?
- Are there any tasks that are not necessary tasks? Why are they less necessary than others?

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

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- In reflecting on the tasks listed, highlight that all domestic work is a form of care work, some maybe direct, and others indirect (see box 3 for details).
- Ensure that tasks that are not reflected in the charts are also surfaced and enquire on whether/why they think this is not important (see Box 4 for how domestic work is valued).
- Get the group to engage with the wide range of tasks performed by domestic workers to build an understanding of the indispensability of domestic work.

### BOX 3: DOMESTIC WORK AS A FORM OF CARE WORK

One way to think of paid domestic work is to understand it as a form of care work – work that is directed at a person’s well-being, aimed at meeting their physical, psychological, emotional, and developmental needs.

This work includes *direct care work*, which is person-to-person (for example, the work of feeding, bathing, or nursing children, disabled, elderly, ill members of a family),

as well as *indirect care work*, which are activities that are also necessary for a person’s well-being, but do not involve direct person-to-person care (activities such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, collecting water, and so on).

See for details:  
International Domestic Workers Federation,  
[Understanding Care](#).

### EXERCISE 3.2 RANKING OF TASKS BASED ON PERCEIVED SKILL

*Time required:* 1 hour

*Material required:* Charts, Colour Marker, Meta Cards, Tape

*Process:* The participants have already enumerated tasks in the previous exercise - a single task per card. Include any further tasks per card that may have been missed. Ask the participants to rank each of the tasks based on what they believe is the skill required for the task based on a gradation of 1-5 with 5 being the task requiring the most skill. The group has to come to a collective agreement on what value to assign to each task. Interrogate the reasons for the grade assigned. Probe the relationship between skill and value of the work.

#### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

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- Draw on Box 4 below for how domestic work is perceived and valued.
- Engage the group to reflect on how and why domestic work is often considered unskilled work.
- Uncover and question the assumption that domestic work is second nature to women and requires no skill, and that, for women, the work of cooking, cleaning and caring is as easy and natural as breathing.
- Reiterate that each of the tasks of domestic work require skill, which is honed through experience.
- Engage the group to reflect on the implications of the relationship between the skill associated with domestic work and the value assigned to it by society in terms of the wages that domestic workers are able to command, as well as how minimum wages are calculated for domestic work.

## FOLLOW UP PROCESS:

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- Ask participants *to switch the location* where the task is performed (for e.g., cooking in restaurants, or looking after children in nurseries, or caring for disabled, elderly in hospitals). Would they reassess the skills required for the task, and its associated value if the location changed?
- Ask them *to switch the person* doing the task (e.g., the employer or another person of authority). Again, would they reassess the skill required and the value for the task? Probe the reasons for the same.

## NOTES FOR FACILITATORS/ QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

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- Some kinds of tasks of domestic work may involve work outside the house, but overall, important to focus on where women domestic workers perform domestic work, especially that which renders their work invisible, and hard to recognise and value as work
- The value of domestic work is also closely associated with who performs the work. As we have seen previously, domestic work is mainly performed by disadvantaged groups of women, because of which it is a form of work that is devalued.

### BOX 4: RECOGNITION OF DOMESTIC WORK AND ITS VALUE

Paid domestic work is a form of work that is not adequately recognised as work by employers, the state and society. It is also a highly devalued form of work. There are several interrelated reasons for this. The foremost reason is that domestic work is often seen as a ‘natural extension’ of women’s caring roles, requiring none or few skills. Moreover, the work of care and domestic labour, whether paid or unpaid, is itself devalued.

#### *Who performs domestic work:*

Another reason for the devaluation of domestic work is because it is performed mainly by marginalised groups of women such as Dalit, Adivasi, OBC migrant women, whose lives are themselves dehumanised and devalued. This influences how the labour/ domestic work performed by them is valued.

#### *Place of performance of domestic work:*

Further still is the place of performance of domestic work. Domestic work is performed in the ‘private’ space of the house rather than in an office or a factory or a field. In this sense, domestic work does not have the markers of what is considered ‘real’ work as the household is not considered a real workplace. Moreover, the workplace of the domestic worker is a socially isolated workplace, rendering the work of domestic workers ‘invisible’, and making domestic work difficult to recognise and value as work. This is also one of the main reasons given for the state to not recognise domestic work.

#### *Ambiguous relationship with employer*

embedded in hierarchies: Domestic workers fall in a liminal space in terms of the relationships they have with the households

they work for – they are neither considered a member of the family, nor are they considered as ‘proper’ employees enjoying the full advantages of being employed such as a clearly defined working relationship with distinct parameters of work.

Over the past 30 years, there have been persistent struggles by women’s rights and domestic workers’ rights organisations to reframe how domestic work is perceived, recognised and valued. They have sought to locate paid domestic work as a form of care work, as a form of indispensable and essential form of work without which society, particularly the middle-and upper-class households that depend on them, cannot function.

Domestic worker groups in the country have also sought to bring this relationship under scrutiny, to redefine and recognise the relationship between domestic worker and employer as one of *employment* and not one of patronage that is rooted in caste, class, and gendered hierarchies. A significant part of these efforts has been to recognise domestic work as work in the eyes of the state and the law, on which more below.

See for details:

Devika, Nisha and Rajshree, 2011, ‘[A Tactful Union’: Domestic Workers’ Unionism, Politics](#), Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 18 (2).

ILO, 2015, [Indispensable yet Unprotected](#), ILO.

Moghe, 2018, [Domestic Workers](#), Working Paper No.9, Action Research on Women’s Labour Migration in India, CWDS.

## EXERCISE 3.3 VISUALISATION TOOL ON THE VALUE OF DOMESTIC WORK

*Time required:* 90 mins

*Material required:* Charts, Colour Marker, Meta Cards, Tape

*Process:* Ask the participants to reflect on their daily routines as a domestic worker and to list all the work that they do for their employers on a card. Then, ask them to imagine a scenario where they are no longer working in her/their employers' house. On separate cards, ask them to visualise and note down the impacts on each of the following:

- Each member of the household (children, men, women). Reflect also on the impacts on the elderly, ill, disabled in the household.
- The employers of the working members of the household in which domestic workers work.

Collate all responses and reflect as a group on the impacts of the non-performance of domestic work on society at large.

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

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- To highlight the value of domestic work, get the group to reflect on how it is a part of wider conceptualisations of care work (see Box 3 above). Domestic work as a form of paid care work may not be valued, but it contributes to the household, economy and society. It is essential, necessary, indispensable work.
- In interrogating the value of domestic work, also probe the idea that it is difficult to assign value to the work of care/love – given its performance by women, as an extension of their 'natural roles' as nurturers, those who provide love and care. Also get the group to reflect on the following questions:
- Does the understanding of domestic work as care work make it difficult to also recognise the arduousness, exhaustion, emotional depletion of domestic work?
- Does it mask/make difficult an analysis/critique of the so-called 'dirty work' associated with domestic work?
- Is it also important to locate both the laboriousness and the social meanings associated with domestic work? Why is this important?
- In locating the value of the care work performed by domestic workers, also get them to reflect on the impacts of their paid work on the care needs of their own families in a care chain.

## EXERCISE 3.4: EXERCISE ON TERMS USED TO DESCRIBE DOMESTIC WORKERS

*Time required:* 30 mins

*Material required:* Charts, Colour Marker, Meta Cards, Tape

*Process:* Divide the group into appropriate smaller groups. Distribute cards to each group and ask them to list all the terms that they know that are used to describe domestic workers, one on each card. Ask them to stick their cards on the wall chart. Cluster cards to avoid repetitions. In the wider group, ask the participants to address the following questions:

- What are the issues with the terms in circulation?
- Why is it important to use the term 'domestic worker'?

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

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- Terms such as domestic worker reimagine work that is denigrated and devalued in society as a form of valuable work, indispensable to society.
- Workers recognising their work as a form of work is critical to its recognition of work by employers, society and the state.

## SESSION 4:

# Nature of the Workplace and Diversity of Work Arrangements

### Purpose:

- To reflect on why it is important to recognise the household as a workplace for domestic workers
- To understand why it is important to recognise the relationship between employers and domestic workers as an employment relationship
- To understand the diversity of working arrangements of domestic workers and how this impacts the terms and conditions of their employment, as well as the claims making by domestic worker groups for the realisation of their rights

There are 2 exercises for this session.

## EXERCISE 4.1 ROLE PLAY EXERCISE ON NATURE OF THE WORKPLACE

*Time required:* 90 minutes

*Material required:* Charts, Colour Marker, Meta Cards, Tape

*Process:* Divide the group into 4 role-playing groups, 3 of whom are women worker groups. Group 1: 'the factory worker group', Group 2: the 'home-based worker' group and Group 3: the 'domestic worker' group. Group 4 is the 'observer' group. Explain to the participants that throughout the role-play, they have to stay in character. Stage a conversation between the 3 women worker groups on the nature of their workplaces and their employment relationships centred around the following questions:

- Does the place of your work hinder or enable you to be recognised as a 'worker'?
- Does the nature of your employment relationship hinder or enable you to be recognised as a 'worker'?
- Does the nature of your employment hinder or enable you to be recognised as a 'worker'?

Ask the third 'observer' group to observe the conversation and to reflect on the following questions:

- What are the some of the similarities and differences between the 3 groups in relation to the 3 questions?
- Does the ability of the respective workplaces to be subject to public scrutiny hinder or enable better working conditions?

Back in the wider group, ask the participants to also reflect on these questions:

- How is the place of work seen as a hurdle to the regulation of domestic work?
- On what basis would they make the case that domestic workers (and home-based workers) are workers, just the same as factory workers?
- On what basis would you make the case that there is an employment relationship between domestic workers and their employers?

## NOTES FOR FACILITATORS

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- Draw on notes in Box 4 above on the place of performance and the often-ambiguous nature of the relationship between domestic workers and their employers to flesh out why domestic work is not considered 'real' work
- Reiterate that domestic work is work no matter where it is performed, and that there is an employment relationship between a domestic worker and her employer

## EXERCISE 4.2: META CARD EXERCISE ON DIVERSITY OF WORK ARRANGEMENTS

*Time required: 1 hour*

*Material required: Charts, Colour Marker, Meta Cards, Tape*

*Process: Give each participant a card. Ask them to note down two things:*

- Do they live in their own houses, or in that of the employer?
- How many employers do they have?

Ask participants to arrange each card on the wall into these 3 categories: live-in domestic worker, live-out domestic worker with one employer, live-out domestic worker with more than one employer.

After the clustering, give the participants another card and ask them to note down how many hours of paid domestic work they do in a day in total. On another part of the wall, ask them to cluster their responses based on the hours of work of each domestic worker (1,2,3...). After this second set of clustering, ask them to collectively reflect on the following questions:

- Why is it important to think about the diversity of work arrangements of different categories of domestic workers? How does the diversity of work arrangements impact the conditions of work for different categories of workers?
- Why is it important to understand the number of hours that a domestic worker puts in at work? What possible implications could there be for their rights at work?
- Who is responsible for ensuring that domestic workers have decent working conditions? Would your response change based on whether they had a single employer who employed a domestic worker only for a few hours, a single employer who employed her for a full-day, or if she had multiple employers?

## NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

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- Draw on Box 5 below on diversity of working arrangements
- We will examine the details of the poor working conditions in the next module. For now, the important thing to focus on is the diversity of the working arrangements and the implications of these for working conditions and the regulation of domestic work

## BOX 5: DIVERSITY OF WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

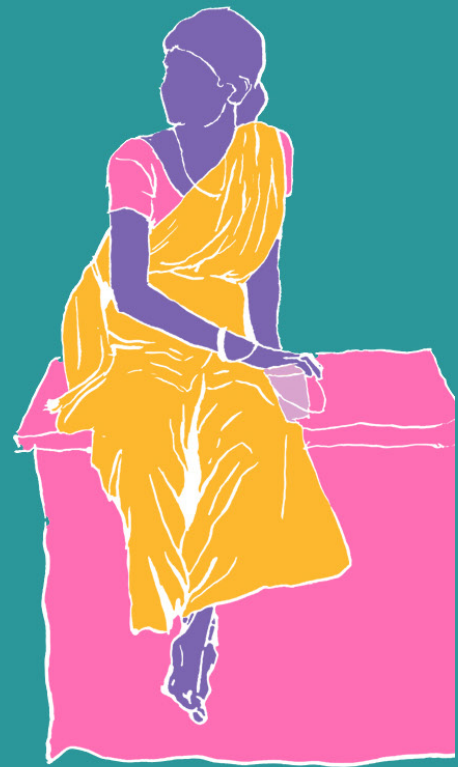
Domestic workers not only perform a range of diverse tasks, but they also have a range of working arrangements with their employers. They may live in the household of the employer (live-in workers), or they may commute to the workplace (live-out workers). Live-out domestic workers tend to also have a multiplicity of working arrangements ranging from a single employment relationship to a multiplicity of employers. Additionally, they may work for a few hours, or a full workday. On the other hand, live-in workers are usually employed by a single employer, and often placement agents tend to play an important role as intermediaries, shaping the terms of the contract between employers and workers.

These diverse working and contractual arrangements shape the conditions of work for both live-in and live-out domestic workers, which we examine in further detail below. Understanding the nature and diversity of the working arrangements is important because it helps us locate the complexity of the demands made by domestic workers for the realisation of their rights. Unlike other workers who often have a single employer for whom they work a full working day, live-out domestic workers with multiple employers have to navigate demanding their rights from several employers, each of whom employ domestic workers ‘part-time’, even though for a domestic worker, it adds up to a full working day. This impacts, for e.g., the differential wages, leaves and bonuses they bargain for with each, as well as the crucial question of who is responsible for their right to social security. This picture is further complicated by the working arrangements of domestic

workers who work for a single employer for whom they work ‘part-time’ and by the working arrangements of live-in domestic workers who work for a single employer for whom they work a full working day with board and lodging.

# Lived Experiences and Issues Faced by Domestic Workers





The objective of this module/lesson is to enable the participants to critically examine the issues domestic workers face in their lives from an intersectional lens and to reflect on the following:

- Gender-based discrimination and violence they face in their daily lives, including the double burdens they carry as working women
- The precarities that structure the lives of domestic workers (poverty, migration, lack of access to services)
- The double burdens that domestic workers face
- The impacts of life-cycle crises such as death, illness, and of major crises such as displacement and the pandemic
- The exploitative conditions under which domestic workers perform work from a labour rights perspective
- The additional issues of long working days, restrictions on mobility and surveillance faced by live-in domestic workers
- The discrimination and violence they face including caste and religious based discrimination, as well as sexual harassment and domestic violence

It is divided into 5 sessions and the total time required for the module is 11.5 hours

# Introduction

Purpose:

- To explain the purpose of the module
- To understand the expectations of the participants from the session, and
- To set the scene for an understanding of the impacts of gender-based discrimination

## EXERCISE 1.1 SONG-BASED REFLECTION

*Time required: 30 mins*

*Material required: Song 'Tu Bolegi, Muh Kholegi'*

*Process:* Welcome the participants with a song, 'Tu Bolegi, Muh Kholegi'. Introduce the topic of gender-based discrimination through this song with the following questions:

- Which words of the song attracted your attention or what did you feel after listening to the song?
- What is the song about?

With these few questions, begin the discussion on the extent of gender-based inequalities/discrimination in women's lives. Probe further by asking whether they have experienced this in their families, their lives, their surroundings. If they have, then what was this experience and in what forms did they occur? By discussing the responses received from the participants, various dimensions of gender-based discrimination can be understood from their perspective.

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS :

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- This initial discussion will be useful in focusing everyone's attention on the topic.
- It is important to know how they experience and understand gender-based discrimination as this will help us in further training

# What is gender and gender construct?

Purpose:

- To understand the concept of gender and the process of socialization
- To reflect on the experiences and impact of gender inequality, gender norms and constraints at different stages of our life cycle
- To reflect on the gender-based access and control over resources

There are 3 exercises for this session.

## EXERCISE 2.1: SAGE'S BOON (STORY)

*Time required:* 30 minutes

*Materials required:* Wall chart and pens

*Process:* Start with sharing a story with the participants to explain the concept of gender.

The story is as follows:

There lived a couple in Rampur village who had been married for 10 years but had no children. They were both very sad. They tried all kinds of treatments and methods but were unsuccessful. At last, they went to a sage who promised them the happiness of being parents. But he added a rider – they could ask for only one child, and both of them had to agree/decide on whether it was a boy or a girl.

Now, pose the same question to the participants and ask them what decision they think the couple should take and why? Give everyone some time to think and then write a boy on one side and a girl on the other side of the chart and write everyone's reactions below it. Most people will likely ask for a boy with similar reasons. Read and discuss everyone's responses with the following questions:

- Can a girl not run a household if she is given good education?
- Are there no such examples around us?
- Where boys and girls have gotten equal opportunities, have girls not performed better than boys?

By discussing these few questions and linking them to patriarchal norms and relations, the concept of gender and the processes of socialisation can be clarified.

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS :

- This is a good exercise to understand and explain the importance of patriarchy and how it sustains the power of men and boys.
- Through this story, the concepts of gender and gendered discrimination can be clarified by discussing why the son is always given preference and priority and not the girl. The participants should be encouraged to examine how being a boy or a girl impinges on our lives, our choices, our clothes, our education, our behaviour, our opportunities, and what effect such differences have on girls and the entire society.
- Encourage the participants to understand the processes of socialization and how we become accustomed to these behaviours, customs, norms and rules.

## EXERCISE 2.2: LIFE CYCLE OF BOYS AND GIRLS: UNDERSTANDING GENDERED DISCRIMINATION BETWEEN 5 AND 50 YEARS

*Time required: 1 hour*

*Materials required: Chart, Marker*

*Process:* Divide everyone into 4 groups and ask each group to make a chart discussing the changes occurring in boys and girls at different stages of life (between the ages of 5 and 50) and the discrimination associated with it. If the groups are not comfortable working with charts and pens, then they can form 4 groups and demonstrate each step through drama. Throughout, ask them to address the following question:

- How are boys and girls brought up and who among the two gets a better position in the society?

After their presentations, to enable deeper discussions, probe the group along the following lines:

- Why is it that girls are restricted in their mobility and speech?
- What effects does this type of discrimination have on girls and boys?
- Does this discrimination change on the basis of age, family, community?
- Who is responsible for this discrimination from the womb to the funeral pyre?

Discuss the experiences of the participants and the conditions of the society and then connect it with socialization. Ask the following questions with the participants, listen to them and discuss what role we can play in social equality.

- In your opinion, is the culture of silence right? What effect does it have on us?
- How can we change the process of socialization?

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS :

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- The process of socialization starts from birth. A person's gender is felt in everything. A girl is prohibited from laughing loudly, walking fast, keeping short hair, wearing pant-shirt and going out alone. Boys have the freedom to go out and have their say. Both boys and girls break the rules. The girl is emotionally pressurized to follow societal norms. We learn to be a boy and a girl.
- After going through all these stages of socialisation, we start accepting the way things are, as our destiny, and we do not make efforts for change. This can be called an 'acceptance of silence'. On the contrary, those who oppose this system are not looked upon favourably in the family and society.
- Women and men have equal responsibility in taking forward and strengthening this system.

## EXERCISE 2.3: ACCESS, CONTROL AND RIGHTS

*Time required:* 1 hour

*Materials required:* Coloured cards, markers, charts etc.

*Process:* For this we need a total of 12 volunteers. Others will observe the activity carefully and share their experiences at the end.

Draw a picture of a woman on one coloured card and a picture of a man on the other. Give these to two different people. On the remaining cards, in the large group, make a list of valuable items in the house and draw a picture of one item on each card, like -

- Money
- Grain
- Jewellery
- Furniture
- Car/bicycle
- TV/Radio
- Fridge/Machine
- Land/house
- Utensils

Give one card each to the remaining 10 volunteers. Make the person holding the woman card stand in one line and the person holding the man card in another. Now discuss each item, such as money, and whose has access to and control of it. Both earn but who has the right to spend? Ask the person with the item to stand behind either the man (card) or the woman (card) based on responses on who has control.

Similarly, group every item on the list based on who has access to and control of it. With jewellery, can she buy and wear it as per her desires? A woman is responsible for the maintenance of land, house, grains, utensils, etc., but who has control over these items?

Now ask the participants to add one more component to this exercise – children. A woman gives birth to a child, but whose name and lineage does it have?

After all these discussions, we will notice that almost everything is in the man's control. Ask the woman who is with the woman card, how she feels. Listen to their reaction.

After all these discussions, we will see that everything is in the man's share and the woman is standing alone, ask the participant with the woman card, how she feels. Listen to their reaction. Follow this up with reflections for the group, including the experiences of the participants who are observing/watching,

- Ask them if they see any parallels between paid domestic work and unpaid domestic work – do they feel like they have value in the work they do in either place? What are the differences and similarities between the two?
- Why do women have nothing in this social system? Can it be changed? If so, how? Encourage participants to think about the role of the organization to push for changes, as well as changes at the individual level.

## SESSION 3:

# Precarious Lives and Exploitative Conditions of Work

### Purpose:

- To understand the insecurities and trends that structure the lives of domestic workers (poverty, migration, lack of access to services)
- To reflect on the double burdens that domestic workers face and the gendered impacts of life-cycle crises such as death, illness, and of major crises such as displacement and the pandemic
- To understand the exploitative conditions under which most domestic workers perform work from a labour rights perspective
- To locate the additional issues of long working days, restrictions on mobility and surveillance faced by live-in domestic workers

There are 3 exercises for this session.

## EXERCISE 3.1 VISUAL WALL EXERCISE: WHAT IS CHANGING AROUND US?

*Time required:* 1 hour

*Materials required:* Charts/brown paper sheets (A3 or larger), Colour Marker, Meta Cards, Tape

### Process:

#### STEP 1:

Each participant is given two sheets of paper. In the first drawing, participants are asked to show changes they are experiencing in their work, home, or family life. In the second drawing, they are asked to illustrate how these changes make them feel about their future.

#### STEP 3:

The group then walks slowly along the visual wall together, observing the drawings as a collective. Participants are invited to share what they notice when they view all the drawings together, including whether certain situations or themes appear repeatedly.

#### STEP 2:

Once the drawings are complete, a visual wall is created by dividing a wall or floor into three sections—Work, Home/Family, and Future/Feelings—using tape or chalk. Participants place their drawings in the section where they feel each one belongs. At this stage, no explanations are requested.

#### STEP 4:

This is followed by a deeper reflection on emerging patterns. The facilitator guides participants to explore the structural and systemic challenges shaping domestic workers' experiences in the situations depicted, and to identify where hope is visible in the drawings and what creates it. The discussion is framed to emphasise that the drawings reflect broader social arrangements of work, care, and power, rather than individual circumstances alone.

The session closes with a collective reflection, inviting participants to consider what the visual wall reveals about the lives of domestic workers in India today and what they may need to think about or act on in order to influence their futures.

## NOTES FOR FACILITATORS/QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- What do you notice when you look at all the drawings together? Are there many drawings showing similar situations?
- Looking at this wall, what does it tell us about domestic workers' lives today in India?
- What are some of the common challenges that domestic workers are facing? What is the reason behind those challenges?
- How do larger forces—such as economic policies, capitalism, and urbanisation—show up in these drawings, and how do they affect domestic workers' work conditions, mobility, security, and sense of dignity?
- Who benefits most from the current system shown in these drawings? Who bears the greatest burden?
- How do caste, class, gender, migration, or religion appear in these drawings, even if they are not named directly?
- What emotions do we see in the drawings—fear, anger, strength, confidence, care? What do these emotions tell us about domestic workers' everyday lives?
- Where do we see hope—and what creates it?

### BOX 6: BROAD TRENDS SHAPING DOMESTIC WORKERS' LIVES

*The facilitator can draw from the following information to guide the discussion above.*

Economic policies, urbanisation, and changing lifestyles have contributed to the demand for domestic workers, particularly in urban areas. At the same time, demographic changes and the limited role of the state in providing care have further intensified this demand. An ageing population, combined with inadequate public provisioning for childcare, elder care, and disability support, has shifted the responsibility for care work onto households, where it is largely met through the employment of domestic workers. As several studies have shown, domestic work has become a critical but undervalued pillar of urban care economies.

Migration is closely intertwined with the growth of domestic work in cities. Domestic work remains one of the most accessible forms of employment for migrant women due to low entry barriers, informality, and the gendered association of care and household labour with women. Women's migration

into domestic work often occurs through social networks, including relatives, neighbours, or placement agents, which facilitate entry into city-based employment. These migration flows are shaped by both push and pull factors. Limited livelihood opportunities, agrarian distress, and economic insecurity in rural areas push women to seek work elsewhere, while the availability of domestic work in cities acts as a strong pull factor. However, while urban domestic work offers income opportunities, it also places workers in highly unequal power relations, marked by informality, lack of legal protection, and dependence on employers or intermediaries.

See for details:

Neetha, N., (2017a). [Nuances and Overtones of Paid Domestic Work in India. Women's Work in South Asia in the Age of Neo-liberalism.](#)  
*Read the storybook: 'Reversing Domestic Workers' Rights: Stories of Backlash and Resilience in Delhi'*

## EXERCISE 3.2 CASE STUDIES AND GROUP DISCUSSION

*Time required: 90 minutes*

*Process:* Divide all the participants into 2 groups and share one of the two case studies (below) with each group. Let them know that these are real stories, but the names have been changed. Each group reads the case assigned to them and discusses the questions given below. Give each group 30 minutes for this task. After the time is over, ask each group to share their reflections on the questions.

- What are the issues that domestic workers face that can be identified in each of the cases?
- What other issues can you share from your own lives and those of the workers you know?
- What should domestic workers do to address these issues?

### CASE STUDY 1: RANI'S STORY

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. When she was 18, 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 Rani soon took on the job of a domestic worker to make ends meet. 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. Rani, like many others was forcibly relocated from Gautam Nagar to Gautampuri because of city planning initiatives. The displacement was a financial shock, with both her and her husband losing their jobs because of the relocation and facing increased indebtedness. Their children's education also suffered as a result.

Over 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.

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.

For details of Rani's story, see Gender at Work Consulting's Storybook: [Reversing Domestic Workers' Rights](#)

## CASE STUDY 2: ROOPALI'S STORY

35 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 was born in a slum in Gautamnagar, and it was here that her 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. 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. They were also miles from their work and had to live precariously until they were finally 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. The children's education was impacted, and 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. 15 year old Roopali soon found herself accompanying her mother to work in South Extension.

A few years ago, when Roopali was mopping floors at work, a sharp object above the 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.

For details of Roopali's story, see Gender at Work Consulting's Storybook: [Reversing Domestic Workers' Rights](#)

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

- Use the case studies as starting points to identify the inequalities, insecurities and crises that structure the lives of domestic workers that also determine their entry into the sector
- Also use the case studies as starting points to discuss the gamut of issues that domestic workers face at work from job and wage insecurity, poor wages, overwork, lack of sufficient paid leave and holidays, to the lack of social security (see box 7 below for details)
- Encourage the participants to discuss solutions based on real-life cases & how the unions/collectives have supported them to pursue these solutions
- If there is a reporting of an incident of discrimination, harassment or violence during the session, deal with the incident with care and empathy and be prepared with contact information for support systems including the leadership of the union/collective, lawyers, and counsellors.

## EXERCISE 3.3 CASE STUDIES AND GROUP DISCUSSION

*Time required:* 90 minutes

*Process:* Divide all the participants into 2 groups and assign the 2 case studies (below) to each group. These are also real stories with the names changed. Each group reads the case assigned to them and discusses the questions given below. Give each group 30 minutes for this task. After the time is over, ask each group to share their reflections on the questions.

- What are the additional issues that live-in domestic workers face that can be identified in each of the cases?
- Are there similarities that you can see with the conditions of work of live-out domestic workers?
- What other issues can you share from your own lives and those of the workers you know?
- What should domestic workers do to address these issues?

### CASE STUDY 3: PRAMILA'S STORY

Pramila (name changed) comes from a Christian Adivasi family in East India. When she was very young, 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. In 2003, when Pramila was 12 or 13, she was placed as a live-in domestic worker in Delhi by a placement agent who was from her village. 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 eventually decided to return to her village.

A few years later, Pramila found another 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. 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.

For details of Pramila's story, see Gender at Work Consulting's Storybook: [Reversing Domestic Workers' Rights](#)

## CASE STUDY 4: LAKSHMI'S STORY

Lakshmi (name changed), who is 19 years 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. 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. Given the family's circumstances, 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. From the age of 13 to 19, Lakshmi worked in approximately five different households.

Lakshmi recalls one particular job that she took on a couple of years ago. This was an 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 5 in the morning until 9 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. 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.

For details of Lakshmi's story, see Gender at Work Consulting's Storybook: [Reversing Domestic Workers' Rights](#)

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

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- Use the case studies as starting points to identify the additional issues that live-in domestic workers face, including exploitative work conditions such as surveillance and lack of mobility, as well as exploitative relationships with middlemen and placement agents (see box 7 below for details).
- Encourage the participants to also discuss solutions based on real-life cases and how unions/collectives have supported them to pursue these solutions.
- If there is a reporting of an incident of discrimination, harassment or violence during the session, deal with the incident with care and empathy and be prepared with contact information for support systems including the leadership of the union/collective, lawyers, and counsellors.

## BOX 7: CONDITIONS OF WORK

Domestic workers are prone to lives of instability owing to structural contexts of poverty, distress-induced migration that are exacerbated by crises such as displacement and climate change. These conditions are worsened by additional vulnerabilities produced by life cycle events such as marriage or childbirth, and precarity of life in the urban context. There are several conditions of work that are common to both live-in and live-out workers, and the sector overall is characterised by poor job and wage security, poor working conditions including lack of minimum wages, lack of fixed times of work, lack of rest periods and adequate leave, poor health and safety conditions, and acute lack of social security including poor or non-existent maternity and other work benefits.

### **Wages:**

Low wages are a critical component of the poor working conditions of work of domestic workers, and they are invariably negotiated in arbitrary, subjective and biased terms that favour employers. There is no uniformity in the level of wages paid to domestic workers, whether they are live-in or live-out workers. For live-out workers, wages tend to vary based on number of tasks, types of tasks, number of households worked in and the locality where work is performed. There is also a socio-cultural hierarchy within which domestic work is embedded with some tasks such as cooking valued more highly than other tasks such as cleaning. Domestic workers also experience arbitrary cuts in wages, delays in payment of wages, no extra wages for overtime or for extra work, and lack of increments even after working for long years.

### **Working Hours, Rest Day and Leave:**

It is not usual for either live-in or live-out workers to get a weekly day or rest of paid leave. Live-out domestic workers tend to negotiate absences without pay, oftentimes finding replacement workers for their days off themselves, or compensating with extra work on a later date, to avoid causing inconvenience to the employers and losing their jobs in the bargain. Studies have shown that for live-in domestic workers especially, work is characterised by overwork and long working hours, with some of them working 12-16 hr days, pointing to conditions of forced labour.

### **Lack of Work Benefits and Social Security:**

The lack of social security for domestic workers mean that the insecurities experienced by domestic workers during periods of illness, as well as life cycle events - pregnancy and childbirth, death in the family and so on become all the more acute. For e.g., childcare burdens, without social security provisioning by the state (or the employer) are entirely shouldered by domestic workers. In terms of the benefits received from employers, studies have found that 'bonus' paid at the time of festivals was the only additional 'benefit' that domestic workers received apart from their wages. However, there is no uniformity in the giving of gifts and 'bonus' for festivals. The other 'benefits' that workers receive are mostly in the form of loans, or old utensils and clothes. In other words, apart from a few payments made in gratis, there are no benefits and social security that domestic workers receive in the form of maternity benefits, medical benefits, or pensions.

**Lack of/ Poor Provision of Facilities:**

Domestic workers also have poor occupational health and safety at work. There is a lack of protective equipment at work, and they often lack access to clean toilets, and are subject to denial or discriminatory use of toilets. They also face occupational injuries including falls, burns, and so on, and without access to medical benefits or accident benefits, they are pushed further into precarity.

**Discrimination, Harassment and Violence:**

Both live-in and live-out domestic workers routinely face caste based discrimination, which finds expression in not being allowed the use of the same plates and cups as the employers, or of not using the same toilets. They also experience routine harassment and violence including nagging, scolding, false cases of theft, the use of abusive language and beatings. Domestic workers also experience sexual harassment and are also subject to discrimination on the basis of their religion.

**Live-in Workers: Restrictions on Mobility and Living Conditions:**

Along with the poor conditions of work faced by all domestic workers then, migrant live-in domestic workers face additional issues of restrictions on their mobility as well as the curtailment of their interactions with others including their family members. Adequacy and quality of food and lodging are also issues that many live-in workers face. Very few workers have a separate room to keep their belongings and to sleep. They also face exploitation from both placement agencies and their employers. The role of placement agencies, therefore, has become an increasing cause of concern for policy makers and domestic worker groups.

See for further details, ILO, 2015, [Indispensable yet Unprotected](#), ILO.

Moghe, 2018, [Domestic Workers](#), Working Paper No.9, Action Research on Women's Labour Migration in India, CWDS.

**Note from the Union:**

The working conditions of domestic workers are completely inhumane. Their working hours are not fixed. Their minimum wages are also not fixed. There is no provision of social security i.e. weekly leave with salary for them. There is no provision for sick leave with pay for them. There is no provision for sickness and maternity benefits for them and no provision for pension for their old age. Unlike construction workers, there is no facility for the education of their children. Live-in domestic workers have to work 12 to 16 hours a day and although they are entitled to 1 day of complete rest a week with pay and annual leave with pay, in reality they barely get these. Their salary is also absorbed by the placement agents. On one hand, the police and the government remain silent, and on the other hand, domestic workers cannot seek help from the Labour Department or Labour Court regarding their working conditions and whether they have not received or received less wages. Why do domestic workers not get weekly leave with pay? Why is their salary deducted during periods of illness? Why do they not get annual leave with pay? Why do they not even get a bonus of Rs 500 on festivals like Diwali?

## SESSION 4:

# Gender-based violence at home, at the workplace and in public spaces

### Purpose:

- To reflect on the discrimination and violence faced by women domestic workers at home and at the workplace, whether in the form of sexual harassment in the workplace or domestic violence at home, or violence in public places

There are 3 exercises in this session.

## EXERCISE 4.1 CASE STUDY AND GROUP DISCUSSION

*Time required: 1 hour*

*Process:* Divide all the participants into 3 groups and assign the same case study to each group. Let them know that this is a real story with the name changed. Each group reads the case assigned to them and discusses the questions given below. Give each group 20 minutes for this task. After the time is over, ask each group to share their reflections on the questions.

- Where do you see the discrimination/violence in the story and what type of discrimination is it?
- What are the underlying societal norms and systemic issues that drive the violence faced by her?
- What could Pushpa do in such a situation?

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

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- In the presentation, while drawing on the wider context of the violence that sexual and domestic violence that domestic workers face (see Box 8), keep the discussion around questions only.
- If there is a reporting of an incident of violence during the session, do not offer an immediate solution. Instead, deal with the incident with caution, care and empathy and be prepared with contact information for support systems including the leadership of the union/collective, lawyers, and counsellors.

## CASE STUDY 5: PUSHPA'S STORY

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. 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," she says.

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. 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 is extremely challenging, and Pushpa often finds herself borrowing money from her parents to make ends meet.

For more details of Pushpa's story, see Gender at Work Consulting's Storybook: [Reversing Domestic Workers' Rights](#)

## EXERCISE 4.2 CASE STUDY AND GROUP DISCUSSION

*Time required: 1 hour*

*Process:* Divide all the participants into 3 groups and assign the same case study to each group. Let them know that this is a real story with the name changed. Each group reads the case assigned to them and discusses the questions given below. Give each group 20 minutes for this task. After the time is over, ask each group to share their reflections on the questions.

- Where do you see the discrimination/violence in the story and what type of discrimination is it?
- What are the underlying societal norms and systemic issues that drive the violence faced by her?
- What could Sita do in such a situation?

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS :

- In the presentation, while drawing on the wider context of the violence that sexual and domestic violence that domestic workers face (see Box 8), keep the discussion around questions only.
- If there is a reporting of an incident of violence during the session, do not offer an immediate solution. Instead, deal with the incident with caution, care and empathy and be prepared with contact information for support systems including the leadership of the union/collective, lawyers, and counsellors.

### CASE STUDY 6: SITA'S STORY

Sita (name changed) is a woman from Jharkhand who has been working as a domestic worker since the age of 10-12. Sita joined the union during the time of Corona and on March 8, 2021, a report was lodged in the women's police station of Sector 28, Faridabad, in which the matter of salary and sexual harassment came to light.

Sita was not given any money for her work. Instead the 'master' and 'mistress' of the house beat her up and threw her out of the house. However, neither did Sita get any money, nor did the police register a case because no one considers domestic workers as workers. After talking to Sita in depth, it came to light that Sita had also been sexually harassed in her childhood. The first place where Sita worked was for a nurse in whose house she worked for 2 years. The nurse, because her husband was away from home for months due to being in the army, used Sita to fulfil her sexual desires. The nurse used to make her masturbate. The nurse's son also tried several times to establish a relationship with

her. Sita was a minor and felt helpless and she did not know how to speak out against it. After this came to light, Sita filed a case against the two of them with the help of the union. When the case came before the judge, Sita changed her statement and withdrew the case, saying that she wanted to go back to Jharkhand. The reason for this was that the nurse was from her village and was defaming her in the entire village. Another reason was that Sita's family was not supportive. Currently, Sita works as a construction labourer in Jharkhand. However, it has become difficult for her to work because the violence that happened to her in her childhood has had an impact on her mentally and physically. She also lost most of her sight at an early age. After she moved to Jharkhand, the union lost contact with her for a while, but upon reestablishing contact, the union learnt that Sita has not yet recovered from her childhood trauma. For her treatment her ailing eyes, it will cost her up to Rs 2 lakh as that treatment can be done only in AIIMS hospital of Delhi.

## EXERCISE 4.3 CASE STUDY AND GROUP DISCUSSION

*Time required: 1 hour*

*Process:* Divide all the participants into 3 groups and assign the same case study to each group. Let them know that this is a real story with the name changed. Each group reads the case assigned to them and discusses the questions given below. Give each group 20 minutes for this task. After the time is over, ask each group to share their reflections on the questions.

- Where do you see the discrimination/violence in the story and what type of discrimination is it?
- What are the underlying societal norms and systemic issues that drive the violence faced by her?
- What could Hema do in such a situation?

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

- In the presentation, while drawing on the wider context of the violence that sexual and domestic violence that domestic workers face (see Box 8), keep the discussion around questions only.
- If there is a reporting of an incident of violence during the session, do not offer an immediate solution. Instead, deal with the incident with caution, care and empathy and be prepared with contact information for support systems including the leadership of the union/collective, lawyers, and counsellors.

### CASE STUDY 7: HEMA'S STORY

Hema (name changed) is a domestic worker whose family hails from a village in Banda district, Uttar Pradesh. She is in her 30s and was born and brought up in Delhi. She started working as a domestic worker in 2015, after she was married and had children. Her husband was facing some problems in his job due to which the financial condition of the house began deteriorating. When she also began contributing to the household through her work, it had a huge impact, both positive and negative on herself and her household. While she had already been taking care of her children's upbringing, she also began to financially contribute to the household. However, the burden of both paid and unpaid domestic work began to take a toll on her health. She gets exhausted everyday and also falls sick every so often. Even so, Hema's life was trundling along with her husband and children.

One day, however, a storm came into Hema's life which shook her dignity. Hema was returning home after completing her work when she met 3 boys on the way who started making unsolicited comments on her beauty and passing sexual remarks. Hema was very scared for her safety. This continued for some days. And then, one of them followed Hema home. Despite it being in broad daylight and in front of everyone, no one stepped in. Instead, insinuations and whispers began that it must be her fault. When she told her husband about the harassment, her husband asked her to leave the job. However, Hema still goes to work, and has filed a police complaint against the boys. The case is still ongoing.

## BOX 8: NOTE FROM THE UNION ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

These are only 3 stories, but there are many such stories which probably do not even come to light because women do not want to talk about this serious issue or are not able to do so for various reasons and keep suffocating inside. Every day, as a union, we see cases of domestic violence against domestic workers and sexual harassment cases that get suppressed.

There are many forms that sexual harassment at the workplace takes. Domestic workers are often stared at while sweeping and mopping. Lewd comments are passed against them, such as 'today she has come dressed up' or 'she is dressed as a heroine'. They are asked to serve their employers liquor, and sometimes on some pretext, their employers try to touch them. For live-in workers who stay at their employers' houses 24/7, we have heard several stories of horrific sexual exploitation similar to Sita's. These include stories of massages turning into sexual abuse and stories of rape by placement agents. We come across many such cases when we talk to domestic workers in small groups or alone, but they do not want to say these things openly in a public hearing or a big meeting because of family, social pressure and also because of the fear that if the matter comes out into the open, and her employer knows that a male member of the family has been behaving inappropriately, she may not believe her or worse still, may fire her from her job.

There are also stories of other forms of extreme violence carried out by employers, be it the case of the employer beating a domestic worker from Jharkhand in the lift in a society in Noida, or the case of branding,

beating and starving a minor domestic worker with hot tongs in Gurugram (Gurgaon), Haryana. In this second case, the domestic worker, like Pramila and Lakshmi (above) were brought to the employers' house by the placement agency and were treated like this. In all these matters, placement agencies and Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) also do not take any responsibility.

When a woman leaves her home for work, like Hema, many times she is not safe on the road and even in the bus. In such a situation, she does not get a safe environment not only in the employers' houses but also on the way to and from work. Domestic workers of Gadkhor (Faridabad) have also shared that women working in societies there used to leave for their homes before dark, because the route to Gadkhor passes through the forest, where they feel unsafe.

The Sexual Harassment of Women Domestic Workers at Workplace Act 2013 (Prevention, Prohibition, Redressal) Act, which states that if a domestic worker is sexually harassed, then she should go to the local committee and lodge a report under this law. But the sad thing is that even the local committee for the law of domestic workers is not active nor is there any awareness on this issue as to where to register their complaint. Many such stories come before us, but in our 20 years of experience, no case of complaint has ever been made. Hence we demand the activation of local committees, so that women domestic workers can not only become aware and raise their voice against sexual harassment and sexual violence but also seek justice.

## SESSION 5:

# Discrimination on the basis of Religion and Caste

### Purpose:

- To reflect on the discrimination, indignities and violence domestic workers face on the basis of caste and religion

## EXERCISE 5.1 CASE STUDIES AND GROUP DISCUSSION

*Time required: 90 minutes*

### Process:

Divide all the participants into 2 groups and assign the 2 case studies (below) to each group. Let them know that these are real stories, but the names have been changed. Each group reads the case assigned to them and discusses the questions given below. Give each group 30 minutes for this task. After the time is over, ask each group to share their reflections on the questions.

- What are the issues that domestic workers face that can be identified in each of the cases?
- What are the underlying societal norms and systemic issues that drive the violence faced by her?
- What should domestic workers do to address these issues?

## CASE STUDY 8: RABIA'S STORY

Rabia (name changed) 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.

Initially married life in Delhi was good to Rabia, at least at the start. But over time, her husband developed alcohol dependence and with 3 children to feed, 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. When the pandemic hit, Rabia's husband passed away and soon, Rabia found herself spiralling into debt. 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. 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 her employers 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. 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 and what would become of her and her family.

For details of Rabia’s story, see Gender at Work Consulting’s Storybook: [Reversing Domestic Workers’ Rights](#)

## **CASE STUDY 9: RANI’S STORY**

We heard Rani’s story earlier (Case Study 1 above). Rani, who is a Dalit domestic worker is currently 45 years old, and works in two households. She has noticed a change in the attitudes of her employers 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, and feels ostracized and discriminated against.

For details of Rani’s story, see Gender at Work Consulting’s Storybook: [Reversing Domestic Workers’ Rights](#)

## NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

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- When discussing the caste and religious based discrimination that domestic workers face, draw links with the wider forms of caste and religious based discrimination in society
- Also draw links with the preponderance of marginalised groups of women in domestic work, the devaluation of work and the discrimination they face.
- Encourage the participants to discuss solutions based on real-life cases and how the unions/collectives have supported them to pursue these solutions
- If there is a reporting of an incident of violence during the session, do not offer an immediate solution. Instead, deal with the incident with caution, care and empathy and be prepared with contact information for support systems including the leadership of the union/collective, lawyers, and counsellors.

MODULE 3:

# Regulation of Domestic Work and the Rights of Domestic Workers





MINIMUM WAGES ACT

DOMESTIC WORKERS BILL

The objective of this module is to enable the participants:

- To locate the persistent but thwarted efforts to regulate the sector and the purported difficulties of regulating the sector
- To understand the current legal landscape governing the rights of domestic workers
- To reflect on the way forward for regulating the sector

This module is divided into 4 sessions and requires 6.5 hours.

# Introduction

Purpose:

- To explain the purpose of the module
- To understand the expectations from the participants from the session and
- To build an understanding of the persistent but thwarted efforts to regulate the sector and the purported difficulties of regulating the sector

## EXERCISE 1.1: DISCUSSION ON THWARTED HISTORY OF REGULATING THE SECTOR

*Time required: 30 mins*

*Process:* After an introduction to the module and expectation setting, as the participants to reflect on the following questions

- Why has there been so many thwarted attempts to regulate this sector?
- What are the perceived difficulties with regulating the sector?

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS :

- This is an introductory session to highlight the persistent neglect of this sector by lawmakers
- Draw on Box 9 to understand and inform the participants of the numerous attempts to regulate this sector over the years
- Inform the group that while this is the historical picture, we will come to the current legal landscape regulating domestic work, and the more recent attempts to regulate the sector including the law reform process and the enactment of four labour codes, and how they deal with domestic workers, in the coming sessions
- For this session, highlight the supposed difficulties of bringing the 'private' home under the scrutiny of laws, including that of the homes of legislators, who also employ domestic workers.

### BOX 9: HISTORY OF EFFORTS TO REGULATE DOMESTIC WORK AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Since the 1950s, domestic worker groups have demanded a national law on domestic work, which have also reached Parliament through Private Members' Bills, through petitions to the Committee on Petitions, as well as through questions raised by

MPs in Parliament. There has also been an increase in the number and frequency of these demands through Private Members' Bills, recommendations for the regulation of domestic work and a separate law on domestic work through committees and

commissions set up by the government. These Bills and recommendations have included a mix of calls for minimum wages, paid leave, maximum hours of work, the weekly day of rest, paid annual leave, social security provisioning, through both separate provisions for domestic workers, and the extension of labour laws such as the Industrial Disputes Act to domestic workers. Some of these attempts include:

- 1959, 2 Private Members' bills introduced post protest and a hunger strike by Shyam Singh Pawar, General Secretary All India Domestic Workers' Union – the All India Domestic Servants Bill introduced by Kanhaiya Lal Balmiki, and the Domestic Workers (Conditions of Employment) Bill by PN Rajabhoj
- 1972, Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill, 1972 by Hukam Chand Kachwai
- 1977, Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill 1977 by Hukam Singh Kachiwai
- 1988, Recommendation of the National Commission on Self Employed Women (Shram Shakti report) to regulate this sector, endorsed the Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill drawn up by domestic worker groups
- 1989, Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill in Lok Sabha by Thampan Thomas and in the Rajya Sabha by Bapu Kaldate
- 1990, Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill 1990 by Harish Rawat in the Lok Sabha and by Bapu Kaldate in the Rajya Sabha
- 2001, Study Group on Women and Child Labour for the National Labour Commission recommended separate legislation for domestic workers
- 2001, Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill, 2000 by V Saroja
- 2008, Domestic Workers (Conditions of

- Service) Bill 2008 by Mohan Singh
- 2008, the Domestic Workers (Registration, Social Security and Welfare) Bill drafted by the National Commission for Women in consultation with domestic worker groups
- 2009, Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill by Arjun Meghwal
- 2015, Domestic Workers (Decent Working Conditions Bill) by Kirit Solanki
- 2016, Domestic Workers Welfare Bill by Shashi Tharoor
- 2017, Domestic Workers (Regulation of Work and Social Security) Bill by Sankar Prasad Datta
- 2017, Domestic Workers (Regulation of Work and Social Security) Bill by Oscar Fernandes

There are also several versions of Bills drawn up by many domestic workers' groups including the Bill drawn up by the largest network of domestic workers in the country, the National Platform for Domestic Workers (NPDW) – the Domestic Workers Regulation of Work and Social Security Bill 2017 (National Platform for Domestic Workers 2017). The private member Bills presented by Sankar Prasad Datta and Oscar Fernandes are almost verbatim copies of the NPDW Bill.

The government's response over several decades has been to point to the difficulties of administering and enforcing the regulation of domestic work, especially given its performance in 'private households'.

See for details:

Chigateri, Shraddha, 2020. 'Demands for a National Law on Domestic Work: Key Issues and Way Forward', Workshop Report on Paid Domestic Work as 'Decent Work': Global Aspirations and Indian Realities, (18th August 2020 - 20th August 2020), organised by King's College London

# Issues with Regulating the Sector

**Purpose:**

- To reflect on the supposed difficulties of regulating the sector

## EXERCISE 2.1 ROLE PLAY EXERCISE ON 'BUT HOW CAN THE STATE REGULATE DOMESTIC WORK?'

*Time Required: 90 minutes*

*Material required: None*

**Process:**

Divide the group into four role-playing groups: Group 1: the 'employer group', Group 2: the 'government group', Group 3: the 'domestic worker' group, and Group 4: the 'observer' group. Assign the following characteristics to each of the groups, and explain that throughout the role-play, the participants have to stay in character.

### THE EMPLOYER GROUP:

This group consists of three types of employers of domestic work (assign each type to the participants according to group size). There are those that employ domestic workers for 2-3 hours a day (they employ domestic workers 'part-time'). There are those that employ domestic workers for the day, but who do not live with them (they employ 'full-time', live-out workers), and those that have domestic workers live and work in their homes (they employ 'full-time', live-in workers).

They are not a homogenous group – they range from people who understand that the work that domestic workers do is work without which their lives would be in disarray and that domestic workers deserve decent wages, to those that see themselves as benevolent patrons of domestic workers, and those see them as 'paid servants' who have already been paid too much for unskilled work.

However, most of them are reluctant to offer the full range of decent working conditions for domestic workers – minimum wages, maternity leave and pay, sick pay, holidays and so on. Some argue that domestic workers only work 'part-time' in their houses or that as individual employers, it is difficult for them to afford all of these. Some argue that they are already doing so much for workers – they pay for their boarding and lodging, which is already so expensive, and they cannot afford to pay more. Almost all of them are uncomfortable with the idea of labour inspectors coming to inspect their homes, which they consider private spaces.

### GOVERNMENT GROUP:

This group consists of a range of public officials from those that work in the labour department, to MLAs and MPs. While some of them are concerned about the poor working conditions of domestic workers and consider it their responsibility to address these, others, as employers of domestic workers themselves, they carry all the same prejudices in relation to domestic work. Moreover, almost all of them are concerned about the practicalities of regulating domestic work. They argue that because domestic work is carried out in the private space of the household, it is not a workplace like a factory or an office where labour regulations apply. How can we send labour inspectors into private households, they ask. In the case of a domestic worker who has multiple employers, they ask, how can we make each of them responsible for the decent working conditions, including living wages and social security benefits for domestic workers?

### OBSERVER GROUP:

Ask the fourth group to observe the conversation and to reflect on the following questions:

- What were some of the arguments that the employers and the government raised as obstacles for domestic workers claiming their rights as workers?
- Where there any arguments that the domestic worker group raised that fittingly responded to these obstacles?
- Back in the wider group, ask the participants to also reflect on these questions focusing especially on how the place of work and the diversity of working arrangements are seen as impediments to the regulation of domestic work.

### DOMESTIC WORKERS GROUP:

This group consists of members of the union. They believe that domestic work is work, and that domestic workers are entitled to labour rights like other workers. These include a decent, living wage, holidays, leave, bonus, social security benefits, decent conditions of work free from discrimination and exploitation.

Stage a conversation between the three with the domestic workers petitioning their employers and the government for better working conditions.

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS

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Draw on Boxes 4 and 5, Module 1 above on the place of work and diversity of working arrangements to locate the supposed difficulties that employers and the state often find for not regulating the sector

- Also draw on Box 10 (below) to locate why working in a private household is not perceived as a 'real' workplace

## BOX 10: WORKING IN A PRIVATE HOUSEHOLD

One of the reasons, as we have seen in Box 4 above, is that the place of performance of domestic work has a critical role to play in how it is recognised and valued as work. The performance of domestic work in the ‘private’ space of the house rather than in an office or a factory or a field means that domestic work does not have the markers of what is considered ‘real’ work as the household is not considered a real workplace. This has been a crucial factor for the resistance by the state to grant full recognition to domestic work as work by the law and the state, as we shall see in more detail in Module 3. In the eyes of the state and society, a ‘home’ is a home, not the workplace of domestic workers.

This is clearly illustrated by the experiences of domestic worker organisations and unions. When domestic worker organisations and unions have met with members of parliament and legislative assemblies, or members of the administration to put forward the demands of domestic workers including the need to have the union registered, to recognise and deal with the conditions and problems faced by domestic workers, their responses are often to express incredulity at the possibility of considering their own homes as workplaces. They ask, ‘will you send the police to our houses?’

## SESSION 3:

# Landscape of Legal Regulation of the Sector

### Purpose:

- To have a preliminary understanding of the legal landscape regulating the sector, including contract law, criminal law, Resident Welfare Association rules, patchy labour laws and so on.
- To reflect on the importance of a comprehensive labour law framework to regulate domestic work in order to recognise and realise the rights of domestic workers as workers.

## EXERCISE 3.1 META CARD EXERCISE ON TERMS OF EMPLOYMENT

*Time required:* 90 minutes

*Material required:* Charts, Colour Marker, Meta Cards, Tape

### Process:

Give each participant a few cards. Ask them to note down the following on separate cards:

- How did they get their job? For e.g., word of mouth, direct contact, through an agent...?
- Were these verbal agreements or was there a written agreement?
- List each term of the agreement with the employer (and agent) on separate cards

After noting down their responses, ask participants to cluster their cards based on the similarities of their responses (for e.g., agent, verbal, wages, leave, bonus...)

In the wider group, discuss the following:

- What are the conditions of work that have not been negotiated or have been left to the benevolence of the employer (for e.g., social security benefits)?
- What are the conditions of work that are usually thwarted? (for example, agreed upon tasks, time...)?

As a follow-up process, ask them to choose three terms of employment (wages, leave and bonus) and on cards provided ask them to respond to the following on separate cards:

- How were the wages negotiated? Based on tasks, number of residents, number of rooms, time?
- Was leave negotiated? If so, how many days per week, and for those who have multiple workers, are they the same day? If not, do they get any rest day in the week?
- Have they negotiated a bonus? If so, the terms of the bonus?

Cluster the cards on the wall under the specific already clustered groupings, and in the wider group, ask them to reflect on the following:

- the difficulties of negotiating the terms of the agreement and who has the bargaining power in the relationship
- why is it important to have labour law and not just contract law to govern the relationships of domestic workers with their employers?

## NOTES FOR FACILITATORS

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- Highlight the power relations and the differential bargaining power between domestic workers and their employers/agents which determine the skewed terms of the contract for domestic workers
- Draw on Box 11 below to situate contract law as one amongst several legal regimes that govern/could govern the employment relationship
- Highlight the importance of collective bargaining power and labour laws to protect and realise their rights as workers

### BOX 11: LANDSCAPE ON THE REGULATION OF DOMESTIC WORK

In 2011, in a significant landmark for domestic workers, the International Labour Conference adopted C189, or the Domestic Workers Convention 2011 which aims to guarantee basic labour rights for domestic workers by requiring members to take measures to promote and protect the human rights of domestic workers and to promote and realise the fundamental principles and rights at work (freedom of association, elimination of all forms of forced and compulsory labour, abolition of child labour, the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment). India is a signatory to this Convention but has not ratified it.

The Constitution of India provides a framework for labour rights in the country that are founded in both Fundamental Rights and on the Directive Principles of State Policies – many of which have a direct salience for the rights of domestic workers as workers. The Fundamental Rights of the right to equality (Article 14), protection from discrimination (Article 15), the rights to freedom of speech, assembly and association (Article 19), the rights to life and personal liberty (Article 21), prohibition of traffic in human beings and forced labour (Article 23), prohibition of employment of children in hazardous employment (Article

24) as well as several Directive Principles of State Policy such as Articles 38, 39, 39A, 41, 42, 43, 43A and 47 which require the state to promote the welfare of the people, to make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in case of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement, and to secure just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief, as well as a living wage and ensuring a decent standard of life, amongst other things, form the bedrock of the Constitutional framework of labour rights in the country.

Despite this normative landscape at both the international and national levels, there is currently no separate, comprehensive central of state level labour law or policy governing the rights of domestic workers as workers. In effect, domestic workers have largely been left out of the purview of existing labour laws because of which they are not entitled to work-related benefits such as maternity leave or other social security as workers; nor are their working conditions or hours of work regulated, or any grievance redressal mechanism instituted. As things stand, apart from a few instances where labour laws have been extended to include domestic workers, the regulatory framework for domestic workers

is mainly based on laws such as contract, criminal law, as well as other regulatory norms such as those of the market, of bargaining and negotiation, as well as informal rules framed by bodies such as Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) that tend to function as quasi-regulatory bodies.

One of the reasons for this is how labour law conceptualises work. Domestic work does not always fit into legal understandings of a 'standard employment relationship', which is usually understood as a continuous, full-time relationship usually between a single employer and employee. Gendered understandings of work also inform what the law regulates through the use of terms such as 'workmen', 'employer', 'establishment', 'industry', which usually exclude domestic workers, either implicitly or explicitly. Additionally, the legal system finds it difficult to extend the regulatory regime of labour law (registers, inspections, conciliation, grievance redressal, industrial tribunals, and so on) to the workplaces of domestic workers, as it is loath to enter the 'private' sphere of the household.

### **Patchy And Piecemeal Recognition of Domestic Workers' Rights as Workers**

The importance of recognising rights of workers in labour law is that unlike contract law, labour law recognises the power imbalance between workers and employees. In terms of labour law, what exists is a patchy and piecemeal extension of some labour laws to domestic workers in a few central and state laws that focus on limited aspects of the rights of domestic workers such as on wages, social security, and sexual harassment at the workplace. However, in the main, domestic workers fall through the cracks of much of the protections accorded by labour law.

### **Central labour laws that extend to domestic workers**

At the central level, this patchy recognition of the rights of domestic workers as workers in law include the following:

- The first landmark inclusion of domestic workers in labour laws at the national level came with the inclusion of domestic work as a hazardous occupation in the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation Act) 1986 through an amendment in 2006. This prohibited children under 14 from being employed as domestic workers.
- The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act 2008 was the second national level law to include domestic workers under its purview. It has since been amalgamated into the Code on Social Security 2020, on which more below.
- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 was another landmark legislation to include domestic workers. However, there are serious gaps with the implementation of the law for all women workers, including informal workers. There is also no clear line of authority or coordination for the effective implementation of the Act. The authority to enforce the Act lies with the District Magistrate or the Collector. However, the implementation of the Act is monitored by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and the inspection regime for labour laws is under the Ministry of Labour and Employment.

### **Labour laws at the state levels**

The Constitution devolves responsibility for enactment and implementation of labour laws on both central and state governments. Over the years, state governments have

included domestic workers in their minimum wage laws, a few states have set up sector specific laws, and a couple of states have also been successful in promulgating laws regulating placement agencies in their states.

### **Minimum Wages**

Several states, including Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Kerala, Odisha, Jharkhand, Meghalaya, Haryana, Punjab, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Tripura have extended the benefits of the Minimum Wages Act 1948 to domestic workers by including them in the list of scheduled employment and by notifying minimum wages. However, the question of how to compute minimum wages for domestic workers is wrought by the caste-based and gender based occupational segregation in domestic work, and its subsequent undervaluation. Often, domestic work is classified as unskilled work, despite the various skills involved in the range of tasks performed in domestic work, as well as the experience that domestic workers bring to their work. It is also difficult to fix wages on a uniform time-rated or piece-rated basis, given the diverse patterns of work for live-in and live-out workers.

The Minimum Wages Act 1948 has since been incorporated into the new Code on Wages 2019 (on which more below).

### **Tripartite Welfare Boards**

One of the means through which a few states have sought to address the rights of domestic workers have been through the setting up of tripartite boards either for the wider category of unorganised workers (under the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, UWSS) or through sector specific tripartite boards to provide benefits

and social security to registered workers. This includes Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra. These boards register workers and distribute benefits to registered workers in the event of an accident, provide for the education for children of domestic workers, maternity benefits and so on. However, for example in Maharashtra, the criticisms have been that there are no clear source of funds, and the welfare board does not provide for the regulation of the working conditions of paid domestic workers. It also does not mention any legislation for minimum wages and other worker rights. Other states such as Kerala, Karnataka, Chattishgarh, West Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Gujarat, Tripura, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Andaman & Nicobar have also created welfare boards for the unorganised sector, including for domestic workers.

Over the last few years, the poor implementation of the law on UWSS has been brought to the attention of the Supreme Court, which has issued a series of orders based on the special leave petition by Shramajeevi Mahila Samiti, a Jharkhand based NGO. In August 2017, the Supreme Court directed the Delhi government to register all domestic workers in its jurisdiction under the UWSS Act 2008, so that they may avail of the schemes under the Act. Since then, it has issued orders directing the Centre not to disburse any grants to the states which have not registered domestic workers under the Act and notices to all state governments to file a status report on the action that they had taken in compliance with its earlier orders.

The UWSS Act has since been incorporated into the Code on Social Security 2020 (on which more below).

### **State Level Placement Agencies**

Discussions on the regulation of placement agencies have focused on either the expansion of a few existing laws (for instance through registration under the Shops and Establishment Act), or a separate law on placement agencies. In 2012, the Delhi government drafted the Delhi Private Placement Agencies (Regulation) Bill 2012, which required the compulsory registration of all placement agencies and at least one kin of the domestic worker; no placement agency would be allowed to place domestic workers without a license – this was criticised by domestic worker groups because it only required the registration and licensing of placement agencies and again, had nothing at all to say about workers' rights and welfare. Again, the courts, rather than the government, have been pushing the agenda on the regulation of placement agencies with the Delhi High Court directing the Delhi government to register private placement agencies in the capital.

There have been a few efforts to regulate placement agencies in a few states. In 2013, Chhattisgarh passed the Chhattisgarh Private Placement Agencies (Regulation) Act, 2013 which mandates that no placement agent/agency can operate to supply domestic workers outside the state of Chhattisgarh without a license. It further mandates that the agency shall furnish the details of employment of the domestic workers to the controlling authority within seven days of her movement beyond the boundaries of the state, prohibits the employment of (female) domestic workers below the age of 19, it prohibits the charging of fees to domestic workers, and it mandates the maintenance of a register containing the names and addresses of domestic workers, who are engaged by it and also names and

addresses of persons, where the women workers have been employed. Breach of the rules under the Act are cognisable and non-bailable offences.

A similar law has been passed in Mizoram in 2015 – The Mizoram Private Placement Agencies (Regulation) Act 2015. A law in Assam regulating placement agencies for a wider category of 'workers' including domestic workers that recruit and supply both in Assam and outside the state – The Assam Private Placement Agencies for Recruitment of Workers (Regulation) Act was enacted in 2019. This Act also provides for the powers of inspection for an inspector appointed under the Act. Overall, again, there is a sore lack of research that examines the effectiveness of these laws (also because of their recency), in regulating the working conditions of domestic workers.

### **More Comprehensive Law at the State Level**

Apart from these sporadic and piecemeal efforts, there have also been efforts over the years to come out with a more comprehensive law to address the rights of domestic workers, for e.g., in Kerala. Recently, the Karnataka government has proposed a new Bill, the Karnataka Domestic Workers (Social Security and welfare) Bill, 2025.

### **New Labour Codes**

In 2014, after the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government was elected to power, on the basis of the recommendations of the Second National Labour Commission (SNCL), it initiated a series of wide-ranging reforms at the central level in the name of the 'ease of doing business' through

‘labour flexibility’. This reform process was to eventually lead to the enactment of 4 new labour codes consolidating 29 previous enactments: the Code on Wages 2019, the Code on Industrial Relations 2020, the Code on Social Security 2020, and the Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions 2020. In November 2025, these codes came into force with the notification of the rules for the Codes.

The labour law reform process provided a singular opportunity for the government to include domestic workers in existing labour laws; however, the inclusion of domestic workers in the new labour codes continues to be patchy and piecemeal.

### **Code on Wages 2019**

The Code on Wages 2019 consolidates and amends 4 laws relating to wages, bonus, and so on providing all workers with a statutory right to a minimum wage and timely payment of wages. The expansion of applicability to all employer-employee relationships, without an apparent threshold limit seemingly includes informal women workers such as domestic workers. However, there continues to be some ambiguity about the applicability of the Code to domestic workers because the Code does not specifically mention domestic workers, and the definition of employees and workers in the Code continues to be tied to an ‘establishment’, which, along with categories such as ‘industry’ have been used to exclude domestic workers from the ambit of labour laws.

### **Code on Industrial Relations 2020**

The Code on Industrial Relations 2020 amalgamates 3 laws that regulate industrial relations that regulate trade union registration, the making of rules and model standing orders by the central government,

as well as regulations on strikes, lockouts and layoffs, retrenchment, and closures. This Code only has a limited applicability to domestic workers through the inclusion of domestic workers as workers to whom sections of the Code on the registration of trade unions applies. The Code has not included SNCL recommendations on the recognition by the law of other member-based organisations in the unorganised sector. Other than the sections on the registration of trade unions, domestic workers are excluded from other provisions of the Code which provide for resolution of disputes relating to terms of employment or conditions of service through mechanisms such as grievance redressal committees. The provisions on model standing orders (that deal with how workers are intimated about periods of work, holidays, wage rates, notice for termination, etc.) as well as mechanisms to resolve industrial disputes also do not apply to domestic workers. This is because there is a specific exclusion of those in domestic service from benefitting from these provisions of the Act. The Standing Committee on Labour had recommended that the Code on Industrial Relations should have a separate chapter on unorganised sector in the Code to specifically extend the provisions of the Code to the unorganised sector, but this is not reflected in the Code.

### **Code on Social Security 2020**

The Code on Social Security 2020 amalgamates and consolidates the provisions of 9 central labour laws relating to social security. This Code has a differentiated approach to social security provisioning based on the size and nature of establishments, as well as on whether workers fall under the definition of ‘employees’, ‘building or other construction workers’, ‘unorganised workers’ and ‘gig and platform workers’. For unorganised sector

workers, including domestic workers, the Code mainly replicates the provisions of the Unorganised Workers' Social Security (UWSS) Act 2008, leaving much to the central and state governments to frame and notify suitable welfare schemes.

### **Code on Occupational Health and Safety 2020**

The Code on Occupational Health and Safety and Working Conditions 2020 replaces 13 laws regulating health, safety and working conditions of workers.

Domestic workers do not come under the purview of this Code as there is a threshold of applicability of ten or more workers in the definition of establishment under the Code. Therefore, all the stipulations in the Code relating to health and working conditions (potable drinking water, ventilation, sufficient lighting, arrangements for latrine), and weekly and compensatory holidays, extra wages for overtime, annual leave with wages, etc. do not apply to domestic workers.

Overall, therefore, the labour law reform process has not made any strides in addressing the issues of domestic workers.

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Given this abysmal state of affairs in relation to the regulation of domestic work, in January 2025, in a significant judgement for domestic workers, the Supreme Court of India, in a case of wrongful confinement and trafficking of an Adivasi domestic worker from Chhattisgarh in Delhi, directed the Union Government to constitute an Expert Committee to examine 'the desirability of recommending a legal framework for the benefit, protection and regulation of the rights of domestic workers' on the basis of

which the government could consider 'the necessity of introducing a legal framework which may effectively address the cause and concern of domestic workers' (Ajay Malik v State of Uttarakhand and Anr. 2025 INSC 118).

See for details:

Chigateri, Shraddha, 2020. Recognising the Rights of Domestic Workers as Workers: Key Issues and Way Forward for Policy Making, Report prepared for the Self-Employed Women's Association

Chigateri, Shraddha, 2020. 'Demands for a National Law on Domestic Work: Key Issues and Way Forward', Workshop Report on Paid Domestic Work as 'Decent Work': Global Aspirations and Indian Realities, (18th August 2020 - 20th August 2020), organised by King's College London, <https://lawsofsocialreproduction.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Domestic-Work-Report-August-2020.pdf>

## EXERCISE 3.2 CASE STUDY AND GROUP DISCUSSION

*Time required:* 90 minutes

*Process:* Share the given case with the group and divide the participants into 3 smaller groups. Let them know that this case is based on a real story drawn from reports. Ask each group to share their reflections in the wider group on the given questions.

- What are the ‘laws’, including rules and norms that govern the relationship between domestic workers and employers in this case?
- What other informal rules and norms govern your working lives that are not based on contractually agreed terms, for e.g., during COVID?

In plenary, discuss the implications of these laws and rules for the recognition of their rights as workers, and what needs to be done to realise their rights.

### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS :

- Reflect on how laws and the might of the state are often weaponised against domestic workers, whether it be criminal laws, administrative rules, or the informal rules and norms of RWAs, who act as quasi-regulatory authorities
- Reflect on the heightened rules of surveillance of domestic workers and the indignities that were inflicted on them during COVID to come to a shared understanding of rules governing their lives in ‘normal times’
- Bring in the lens of the importance of collective bargaining (despite the immediate backlash in this case) and instituting labour laws to shift the weaponisation of laws, rules and norms against domestic workers

### CASE STUDY 10: ZOHRA BIBI’S STORY

In July 2017, Zohra Bibi, a domestic worker in Mahagun Moderne, a gated complex in Noida, Uttar Pradesh went missing after she went to work at her employer’s house. Accused of theft, she was illegally detained in the apartment complex. The next morning, when her husband and other domestic workers gathered at Mahagun Moderne to ascertain her whereabouts, she was brought to the gates by security guards, exhibiting clear signs of assault. The gathered crowd broke into a protest against Zohra’s harassment from the residents.

Instead of acting on Zohra’s complaint against her employers, the police, administration, the local MP and the Resident Welfare Association (RWA) participated in a series of stringent retaliatory actions by the residents against the protestors. Acting on FIRs lodged by the residents of Mahagun Moderne, the

police conducted a midnight raid in the locality and detained 58 persons and arrested 13 on charges of vandalism and attempt to murder. Zohra’s minor has also been detained without cause. The Resident Welfare Association also blacklisted 143 domestic workers to prevent them from finding employment in other societies in the area. Identifying them as illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, the residents also petitioned the Noida authority against the ‘encroachments’ of the workers’ shops and houses – bare shanties with no potable water or electricity. In response, the NOIDA authority razed more than thirty shanties around the apartment complex where the protestors lived.

Abridged and edited from a Counter Currents report, [Mahagun Moderne: Communal Attacks, Arrests And Eviction Of Migrant Workers In Noida, UP, 25 July 2017](#)

# Recognising Domestic Workers' Rights in Law

## Purpose:

- To have the participants come to a preliminary reflection on the range of labour rights that should be protected by a specific law, or incorporated into the labour codes, to address the gamut of issues faced by domestic workers.
- To reflect on the ways forward to realise the rights of domestic workers as workers

## EXERCISE 4.1 META CARD EXERCISE ON LABOUR RIGHTS

*Time required:* 90 minutes

*Material required:* Charts, Colour Marker, Meta Cards, Tape

## Process:

Give each participant several cards and on each card, ask them to list one issue that they face at the workplace, and what they think the solution to this should be. Fill in as many cards as identified problems and solutions. For e.g., if long working hours are a problem, then the likely solution could be a restriction on the number of working hours and/or overtime pay. Once they have completed all their cards, ask each of them to place their cards on a wall and as a group cluster into similar categories. After the clustering exercise, in the wider group, ask them to reflect on the following questions:

- How many of the rights listed are currently protected?
- What needs to be done to ensure that the wide range of labour rights are protected for domestic workers?

## NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

- Remind the participants of several of the issues that they had highlighted in Module 2, particularly on the conditions of work
- Encourage them to reflect on the issues of both live-in and live-out workers
- When they reflect on the solutions to the issues, highlight the importance of framing the solutions in the language of rights
- Draw on Box 11 above to situate the patchy and piecemeal protection of labour rights for domestic workers at both the central and state level
- Highlight the importance of collective action in demanding the comprehensive protection and realisation of their labour rights by the state, society and employers

MODULE 4:

# Leadership and Power





## SESSION 1:

# Feminist Leadership

This session creates space for participants to critically reflect on the leadership they already practise in their communities and collectives, and to articulate the kind of leadership they seek to grow into as organisers and allies to other domestic workers. It examines how leadership is transformed when domestic workers shift from acting individually to acting collectively, and what forms of support, shared labour, and structural change are required to sustain collective leadership. The session introduces feminist leadership not as a position of power or authority, but as a set of practices rooted in responsibility, courage, care, solidarity, and accountability to the collective—values that are central to domestic workers' movements and struggles for justice.

## EXERCISE 1.1: IMAGINING YOUR IDEAL LEADER

*What leadership looks like for domestic workers*

*Time required: 60-75 minutes*

*Material required: Large sheets of paper or flip charts, Markers, coloured pens, crayons, Sticky notes (optional)*

### PROCESS

#### STEP 1: CREATE A VISUAL

Provide everyone with paper and drawing materials. Each participant is invited to create a drawing or visual that represents their idea of an ideal domestic worker leader. They may use words or short phrases, simple symbols for which no artistic skill is required. Encourage participants to focus on personal qualities, everyday behaviours, and the kinds of actions such a leader would take.

#### STEP 2: SHARING WITH THE GROUP

Divide participants into small groups of four to six people. Ask them to share their drawings within their groups, explaining why they chose these qualities and how this kind of leadership helps and strengthens domestic workers.

#### STEP 3: COLLECTIVE REFLECTION

Each group then reports back on the qualities they identified. The facilitator notes the traits or key-words on a whiteboard or chart paper so everyone can see them, and then invites the group into a discussion using some of the following questions.

- What qualities appeared in many drawings?
- What does this tell us about the kind of leadership domestic workers want?
- Is this different from the leaders that you see? How?

#### STEP 4: CLOSING REFLECTION BY THE FACILITATOR

Close the activity by introducing the idea of feminist leadership. Begin by reminding participants that leadership does not only belong to people with authority, education, or loud voices. For domestic workers, leadership often grows from everyday acts of care, courage, and standing together.

Explain that feminist leadership is collective, not hierarchical. This means leadership does not sit with one person at the top, but is shared across the group. Everyone has something to contribute, and leadership can move from one person to another depending on the situation. In domestic workers' collectives, leadership may look like one person speaking today, another organising a meeting tomorrow, and someone else supporting a worker in crisis.

Share that feminist leadership centres care, dignity, and justice rather than control. Unlike the power domestic workers often experience at work—where employers control time, money, and behaviour—feminist leadership is about caring for one another, respecting each other's dignity, and working together to challenge unfairness. It asks not “Who is in charge?” but “How do we support each other and act fairly?”

Finally, emphasise that power in feminist leadership is shared, accountable, and rooted in solidarity. Power grows when people trust one another, make decisions together, and take responsibility for how power is used. When domestic workers come together—sharing information, supporting each other, and organising collectively—they build a different kind of power: power with others, not power over others.

Close by inviting participants to reflect quietly on this question:

*Where do you already see feminist leadership in your own lives or in this group?*

Affirm that when domestic workers organise, care for one another, and stand together for dignity and rights, they are already practising feminist leadership.

#### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS:

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- Encourage participants who may not see themselves as leaders to recognise everyday acts of leadership.
- Emphasise that leadership is collective and can be learned over time.
- Keep the space respectful and inclusive, allowing multiple interpretations of leadership.
- Bring out examples of feminist leadership traits in their conceptualisation of the ideal leader.

## BOX 12: WHAT IS FEMINIST LEADERSHIP?

Feminist leadership is an approach to leadership that seeks to challenge unequal power relations, centre care, justice, and dignity, and transform the social, economic, and political systems that sustain inequality. Rather than focusing on authority, hierarchy, or individual charisma, feminist leadership emphasises collective power, shared decision-making, accountability, and solidarity

At its core, feminist leadership recognises that power operates through everyday structures and resources (such as money and time), norms, and institutions and works consciously to redistribute power rather than reproduce it. It values lived experience as a source of knowledge, particularly the experiences of women and marginalised groups, and understands leadership as a practice that is learned, shared, and nurtured over time, not a position held by a few

Feminist leadership is not simply about women in leadership roles, but about transforming the meaning and use of power itself, moving away from control and domination towards empowerment and collective agency

### What Does Leadership Look Like for Domestic Workers?

In contexts where domestic work is informal, invisible, and carried out in private homes, feminist leadership often takes quiet but powerful forms: listening, supporting one another, fighting collectively for justice, or sustaining spaces of mutual support. For domestic workers, feminist leadership is deeply rooted in everyday life and collective struggle. It may look like:

- Sharing information and supporting one another in moments of crisis
- Building collectives or unions that reduce isolation and come together on issues of working conditions, legal protections of domestic workers
- Challenging discrimination based on caste, class, religion, migration, or gender
- Practising care, accountability, and solidarity within groups

These acts challenge the idea that leadership must be individual or positional.

Feminist leadership for domestic workers also means understanding that personal struggles are not isolated or individual, but are produced by larger systems such as capitalism, patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and the state's failure to fully recognise domestic workers as workers. It recognises that lasting change cannot be achieved through individual effort alone, but requires collective organising, unionising, and solidarity to challenge these structures and transform power relations.

See for further details:

[Batliwala, Srilatha. \*Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud\*. New Delhi: CREA, 2010](#)

## EXERCISE 1.2: IMAGINING OUR LEADERSHIP JOURNEYS

*Time required:* 60–75 minutes

*Material required:* Drawing paper, Crayons, colour pencils, pens, or pencils

*Process*

### STEP 1: SETTING THE CONTEXT

The facilitator builds on the previous session and explains that leadership for domestic workers often looks different from what is usually imagined. It may not involve titles or authority, but can include:

- Speaking up in meetings
- Supporting another worker in difficulty
- Sharing information about rights or employers
- Bringing people together
- Holding the collective together during conflict or fear

The facilitator introduces the session as a space for participants to reflect on how their leadership is evolving and how it can be strengthened in feminist, collective ways.

### STEP 3: SHARING IN PAIRS

Participants are asked to turn to someone next to them, with each person sharing for about five minutes, and are encouraged to listen with empathy. They then discuss the following questions:

- Why does this drawing represent how you practise leadership today?
- What does your future leadership drawing show about the leader or organiser you want to become?
- What are two or three things that would need to change—for you, for the collective, or for the system—for this future leadership to become possible?

### STEP 5: SEEING PATTERNS & COLLECTIVE DIRECTION

Participants are asked to place their drawings on the floor or on a wall, arranging them into two groups:

- Leadership today
- Leadership we want to grow into

### STEP 2: DRAWING LEADERSHIP JOURNEYS

Invite participants to draw **two images**:

- One drawing that shows **how they practise leadership now** (for example: supporting others, staying quiet, feeling unsure, taking initiative, feeling afraid but acting anyway)
- One drawing that shows **the leadership they want to grow into**. This can represent themselves as a leader, or the kind of collective they want to build together.

Emphasise that participants are welcome to use symbols, colours, people, or situations instead of realistic drawings.

### STEP 4: SHARING WITH THE LARGER GROUP

Each pair is invited to share one insight with the full group. The facilitator should remind participants that sharing is voluntary and that attentive listening is also an important form of leadership.

The facilitator invites the group to step back and view the drawings together, and then guides a discussion that helps participants recognise the leadership they already practise, reflect on how it reflects feminist values of care and collective strength, identify gaps and challenges, and collectively name the responsibilities, values, and mutual support needed to develop the kind of leadership their movement requires.

#### NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR:

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The facilitator should acknowledge that taking on leadership can feel risky for domestic workers, particularly in contexts of economic insecurity and fear of retaliation. It is important to emphasise that leadership is shared, evolving, and imperfect rather than fixed or individualised. The discussion should consistently encourage reflection on collective accountability rather than individual heroism, and continually link leadership to organising, unionising, and sustaining collective struggle over time. The facilitator should remain attentive to power dynamics within the cohort so that quieter voices are not overshadowed. An indicative list of questions for the group discussion is:

- What kinds of leadership are already present in this group, even if we do not always recognise them as leadership?
- In what ways is this leadership feminist—does it centre care, dignity, and collective strength?
- What differences do we see between leadership today and the leadership we want to grow into?
- What fears, risks, or pressures do leaders in this collective face?
- What values and strengths appear again and again in the future leadership drawings?
- What responsibilities do we carry towards each other as a leadership cohort?
- What can we do together to support one another in becoming the leaders our movement needs?

## SESSION 2:

# Navigating Power: Our lives, our strengths

This session introduces the concept of power by firmly grounding it in participants' lived experiences as domestic workers, rather than abstract ideas or theory. It creates a collective space to recognise that feelings of power and powerlessness are not individual or isolated, but are widely shared and shaped by larger systems such as gender norms, caste hierarchies, class relations, migration, and the conditions of domestic work itself. Through participatory activities and collective reflection, the session supports participants to name, see, and analyse how power operates in everyday interactions at work, at home, and in public spaces.

By the end of the session, participants will be able to identify recurring patterns of power that go beyond individual experience and understand power as both relational—shaped by interactions between people—and structural—embedded in rules, institutions, and social arrangements. This shared understanding lays the foundation for collective organising, solidarity, and future leadership development.

## EXERCISE 2.1: UNDERSTANDING POWER THROUGH OUR LIVES

*Time required: 75–90 minutes*

*Material required: A4 or letter-size paper (2 sheets per participant), Coloured pens / sketch pens / crayons, Tape or blu-tack, Large wall or floor space, Flipchart and markers*

### *Process*

Introduce power as something that everyone encounters in different ways across their lives—sometimes as moments of confidence and strength, and at other times as moments of silence, fear, or helplessness.

### **STEP 1: INDIVIDUAL DRAWING**

Invite each participant to reflect individually on their own experiences of power. Participants are asked to draw a line down the middle of a sheet of paper. On one side, they draw a moment in their lives when they felt powerful—for example, when they were listened to, made a decision, helped someone, or stood up for themselves. On the other side, they draw a moment when they felt powerless, such as being shouted at, ignored, rushed, unpaid, or afraid to speak.

### **STEP 2: SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION**

Once everyone has completed their drawings, participants are organised into small groups of three to four people. Within these groups, each person is given up to five minutes to explain their drawings, focusing on what made them feel powerful in one situation and powerless in the other. Participants are encouraged to listen attentively to one another. During this time, the facilitator moves quietly between groups, observing and offering support only when needed, and avoiding interruptions unless clarification or gentle redirection is required to ensure safety and inclusion.

### STEP 3: LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

After the small group discussions, the session moves into a plenary reflection. Each group is invited to place their drawings on a wall or floor and to share a brief summary of what emerged from their discussion, rather than recounting individual stories in detail. The facilitator guides the whole group to reflect on what they notice across all the drawings, keeping the discussion focused on shared patterns and connections rather than personal narratives. As the conversation unfolds, the facilitator helps participants recognise how power often operates through control over money, time, rules, and fear.

The session then shifts into a brief individual reflection. Participants are asked to think quietly and identify one word or short phrase that captures what power means to them, based on the discussions so far. They write this on post-it notes or dictate it to the facilitator if they are not comfortable writing. The facilitator collects the post-it notes and clusters them visibly for the group, grouping expressions of positive power—such as confidence, decision-making, care, solidarity, and dignity—separately from expressions of negative power, such as control, fear, silence, and disrespect. As clustering takes place, some words are read aloud so participants can see their own experiences reflected in the collective.

The session closes by inviting participants to reflect on what kinds of power they already hold, even if those forms of power feel small or fragile. Participants are encouraged to recognise that power is not only something exercised over them, but also something they practise and build in everyday ways.

## NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR:

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When introducing the drawing activity, guide participants to focus on one specific moment rather than a general or repeated situation, as this helps deepen reflection and makes sharing easier. Encourage participants to choose an experience they feel comfortable sharing with others, reinforcing that they remain in control of what they disclose. Emphasise that powerlessness is produced by systems, not by individual weakness. Domestic workers' sense of powerlessness is produced by a combination of economic, social, and structural factors that restrict their choices and silence their voices, including low and irregular wages, fear of losing work, lack of contracts and labour protections, and dependence on multiple employers for survival. These conditions are deepened by caste, class, gender, religion, and migration-based hierarchies, isolation within private homes, tight control over time and mobility by employers or housing societies, pervasive fear and insecurity, and the absence of state-supported care systems—together limiting domestic workers' ability to organise, seek redress, and exercise dignity and agency. Underscore that when domestic workers come together, share experiences, and organise collectively, many of these sources of powerlessness can be challenged.

The facilitator may use some of the following guiding questions.

- What words come to mind when we think about power after seeing these drawings and hearing each other?
- Who holds the power? What kinds of power do they (as in employers, agencies, or housing societies or others) seem to hold in these situations?
- Which forms of power feel negative (harmful and controlling) and which feel positive (supportive or strengthening)?
- What made them feel "powerless" or disempowered? What are the underlying reasons?
- When you hear the word "power," what feeling or image comes to mind after this discussion? (for the individual reflection)
- What kinds of power do domestic workers already have? How can it grow when they come together?

## BOX 13: UNDERSTANDING POWER (A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE)

From a feminist perspective, power is not just held by individuals - it operates through systems and structures of oppression that are embedded in social, economic, and political institutions.

Power can be understood as the ability of individuals or groups to influence key decisions in society, such as who gets what, who does what, who sets the agenda, and who decides ([Rao and Kelleher, 2002](#)).

Feminist analysis often looks at power in relation to others, using the following concepts:

### **Oppressive forms of power**

- Power over: When a person or group controls, dominates, or restricts others.  
*Example:* An employer deciding a domestic worker's working hours, wages, or leave without consultation, and threatening job loss if she questions these decisions.
- Power under: When a person or a set of persons experienced abuse, oppression and trauma gain power and use it in ways that are destructive to themselves and others

### **Transformative forms of power**

- Power with: When people come together and act collectively to achieve something that would be difficult or impossible to do alone.  
*Example:* Domestic workers forming a union or collective to demand fair wages, weekly rest days, or protection from harassment.
- Power within: The confidence, self-belief, and awareness that enable people to

recognise their own worth and ability to act.

*Example:* A domestic worker gaining confidence to speak up about unfair treatment after attending rights awareness or leadership training.

- Power to: The ability to take action, mobilise others, and bring about social change.  
*Example:* Domestic workers collectively negotiating with employers or engaging local authorities to secure written contracts or access to social security schemes.

To learn more about power, you can read [Batliwala, Srilatha. 2019. All About Power: Understanding Social Power and Power Structures. New Delhi: CREA.](#)

## EXERCISE 2.2: POWER WALK

*Understanding inequality, power, and everyday advantage*

*Time required: 45–60 minutes*

*Material required: Open space (indoors or outdoors), Printed/written role cards*

*Process*

### **STEP 1: SETTING THE CONTEXT**

The facilitator should explain that this activity is meant to help participants see how power and inequality operate through everyday conditions and shape different life experiences. For instance, some people can move forward in their lives with ease, while others repeatedly face obstacles beyond their control.

The facilitator should also prepare participants for the possibility that the exercise may evoke strong emotions. Participants should be reminded that the activity is not about judging individuals, but about examining how power and systems shape different life paths. The roles are imaginary yet realistic, and participants are not playing themselves but enacting a role based on their own understanding, with no right or wrong way to do so. It should be clearly stated that anyone may step out at any point if they feel uncomfortable.

### **STEP 3: POWER WALK STATEMENTS**

The facilitator explains the rules: if a statement applies to the role a participant is playing, they take one step forward; if it does not, they should remain where they are. Participants should not speak, comment, or react during the activity.

Read out statements slowly, pausing between each (add more statements that are contextual):

- I can refuse extra work without fear of losing my job
- I receive my wages on time every month
- I can take leave when I am sick
- People listen to me when I speak in meetings

### **Step 2: ASSIGN ROLES**

Participants are asked to stand in a straight line, shoulder to shoulder. The facilitator then gives each participant a role card silently and instructs them not to share their role with anyone else.

Sample roles (adapt as needed, add new ones):

- Live-in domestic worker from a Dalit community
- Part-time domestic worker working in multiple homes
- Migrant domestic worker
- Domestic worker placed through an agency
- Domestic worker who is a member of a union or worker collective
- Part-time Muslim domestic worker
- Elderly domestic worker
- Young domestic worker who recently migrated to the city
- Male domestic worker or caregiver
- Employer living in a gated housing society
- Male security guard in a housing society
- RWA committee member
- NGO staff member working on labour or women's rights
- Local government representative

- I am protected if I face harassment or abuse
- I have savings or social security to fall back on
- I feel confident speaking to authorities
- I have access to a restroom at my place of work
- I can send my children without having to worry about fees
- I can rent a house or room easily
- I can say no to work that is unsafe or disrespectful
- I feel safe travelling to and from work
- My time is considered important or respected by others
- I am able to eat at my workplace

#### STEP 4: GROUP REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

(15–20 MINUTES)

Once the activity ends, the facilitator should ask participants to pause and quietly observe their positions without speaking. They should be invited to notice who has moved far ahead, who remains at the back, and the distances between people. The facilitator should then bring everyone back into a circle and begin the reflection gently by asking how it felt to move forward and how it felt to stay behind

#### NOTES FOR THE FACILITATORS

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The facilitator should emphasise that power is unevenly distributed and that inequality is structural rather than personal, shaped by intersecting systems such as caste, class, religion, gender, and migration status. It is important to reinforce that silence and disadvantage are produced through these systems of power, rather than individual choices or abilities, and that collective action offers a way to move forward together. Throughout the activity, the facilitator should pay close attention to participants' emotional responses, avoid singling out particular roles, acknowledge and validate feelings such as anger, sadness, or discomfort, and ensure the session ends with care, reflection, and grounding. Some questions that can be used for the reflection can include:

- What factors pushed people ahead or held them back?
- Were these things within a person's control?
- How do gender, caste, migration, or job type matter here?
- What does this tell us about power in domestic work?
- What changes when domestic workers organise together?
- How can collective action reduce these gaps?
- Who needs to walk together so no one is left behind?

## EXERCISE 2.3: BIG FISH, SMALL FISH- WHO MAKES THE RULES

*Time required:* 1 hour

*Material required:* Room with walls, enough space for the group to move around

*Process:*

The facilitator begins by explaining the game to the group and clarifying its purpose. Three to four participants are then selected as volunteers and assigned the role of “big fish,” while all remaining participants become “small fish.” A pond is marked within the room using walls, ropes, or a clearly defined boundary, and the small fish are asked to stay within this space.

The rules of the game are explained clearly. Big fish are allowed to enter the pond and eliminate small fish by touching them. Small fish can protect themselves by sitting down, as big fish cannot eat them while they are seated. However, if small fish remain seated for more than thirty seconds, they die on their own, which means they must keep moving and occasionally stand up in order to survive. The first round of the game is then conducted, with some participants as ‘observers’ to ensure that the rules are followed correctly.

After the first round, participants are given time to discuss and develop strategies. At this point, an additional rule is introduced: if a big fish touches the boundary wall of the pond, it can also die. The game then resumes for a second round, allowing participants to apply new strategies and observe how the dynamics change. After the second round is complete, the facilitator brings the game to a close and prepares the group for reflection and discussion.

### NOTES FOR THE FACILITATORS/GUIDING QUESTIONS:

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Explain that even when many people are part of a group, they can still be vulnerable to exploitation if they lack awareness, face unfair rules, or do not have access to resources. Guide participants (see sample questions below) to connect their emotions in the game to existing power relations, helping them reflect on who makes the rules, who benefits from them, and how survival strategies emerge under unequal conditions. Emphasise the shift between acting alone and planning together, and draw out how strategising, coordination, and solidarity can change outcomes for domestic workers facing employers and unfair rules.

Some of the questions for discussions are:

- How did you feel while playing the game as a small fish? As a big fish?
- Who made the rules of the game? Who benefited most from them? In domestic work, who makes the rules about time, wages, leave, and behaviour?
- What strategies did the small fish use to survive? What strategies do domestic workers use individually to navigate their relationship with their employers?
- What was the difference between the first and second situations? What changed when they were given time to plan together? What can change when domestic workers come
- together instead of facing employers alone?

## SESSION 3:

# Feminist Organising in Action: Coalitions and Collective Futures

This session invites domestic workers to reflect on why coming together and collectivising is essential for the realisation of their rights. It supports participants in identifying who they need to work with to strengthen organising and in examining the values, roles, and practices that make coalitions strong, accountable, and sustainable over time.

At the same time, the session creates space to imagine a shared future grounded in dignity, rights, and collective power. By linking personal hopes with collective aspirations for the organisation or union, participants deepen their motivation and commitment to long-term organising and develop a shared reference point to guide future goals, roles, and strategies.

## EXERCISE 3.1: CREATING OUR COLLECTIVE VISION BOARD

*Imagining the future we are organising towards*

*Time required: 60 minutes*

*Materials required: Chart paper or large sheets, Old magazines, newspapers, or printed images (optional), Markers, colour pens, crayons, Glue or tape, Sticky notes (optional)*

*Process*

### STEP 1: SETTING THE CONTEXT

#### WHY VISION MATTERS

Begin by explaining that organising is not only about fighting problems—it is also about imagining and building the future we want. As described earlier, it is important to come together to tackle the issues. However, building and sustaining a collective, union, or organisation is not easy. There will be pressure from employers, RWAs, the state, and a lack of money and time, along with internal conflict and fear. A clear vision for change helps organisations stay together and move forward even during difficult times.

Emphasise that this is a collective vision, not individual dreams.

### STEP 2: REFLECTING ON THE FUTURE WE WANT

Invite participants to close their eyes briefly and imagine:

- What does life look like when domestic workers are respected?
- How do employers, RWAs, and the state treat domestic workers?
- How does our collective or union function?
- How do domestic workers feel—confident, safe, united?

After a few moments, ask participants to share a few words or images that came to mind.

### STEP 3: CREATING THE VISION BOARD

Divide participants into small groups of 4–6. Ask each group to create a vision board that answers: What does success look like for domestic workers and our organisation in the future?

Groups can:

- Draw images or symbols
- Use words or short phrases
- Create slogans or messages

### STEP 5: IDENTIFYING PRIORITY VISION AREAS

Participants are asked to look at all the vision boards together again and collectively reflect on:

- Which parts of our vision feel most urgent right now?
- Which parts of our vision will make the biggest difference to domestic workers' lives?
- What is one area we feel ready to act on together?

Facilitate agreement on 2–3 priority vision areas and write these clearly on chart paper.

### STEP 7: SETTING COLLECTIVE ACTIONS

For each goal, ask groups to discuss:

- What are 2–3 actions we can take together to move towards this goal?
- Who might be involved?
- What support or alliances do we need?

Encourage actions that are:

- Collective rather than individual
- Within the group's current capacity
- Linked to earlier discussions on roles and committees

Examples:

- Hold X number of meetings with domestic workers in a locality
- Collect common demands
- Approach RWAs or employers together
- Build alliances with other unions or NGOs

### STEP 4: SHARING THE VISION

Each group presents their vision board and explains:

- What future they are imagining
- Which elements feel most important
- How this vision connects to their current organising

Encourage others to listen and notice similarities across visions.

### STEP 6: TRANSLATING VISION INTO GOALS

Divide participants into small groups again and assign one priority vision area to each group. Each group responds to the two following questions:

- What does success look like for this vision in the next 12-18 months?
- What changes would tell us if the collective is moving in the right direction?

Ask groups to write one clear, collective goal linked to their vision area.

(Keep goals simple, realistic, and shared.)

Example:

Vision: Dignity at work

Goal for the next year: All our collective members have access to restrooms, sanitation facilities and clean drinking water at their place of work.

### STEP 8: SHARING AND COMMITMENT

Each group shares:

- Their goal
- One immediate action they commit to taking

## NOTES FOR THE FACILITATORS

The facilitator should keep this exercise closely grounded in the everyday realities of domestic workers and their collectives, while still holding space for hope and possibility. They should gently guide the group away from overcommitment and support participants in identifying a small number of realistic actions that align with the collective's actual priorities for the coming months. Agreed actions should be clearly noted so they can be revisited, reviewed, and strengthened once the training is over and the collective returns to its organising work.

### EXERCISE 3.2: BUILDING COALITIONS FOR COLLECTIVE POWER

*Why working together across groups matters*

*Time required: 60-75 minutes*

*Material required: Chart paper, Markers, Tape*

*Process*

#### **STEP 1: SETTING THE CONTEXT AND MAPPING**

##### **COLLECTIVES**

Begin by explaining that domestic workers organise in many different ways—through neighbourhood groups, worker collectives, unions, NGOs, and platforms. However, no single group can address all challenges alone, especially when facing employers, RWAs, and the state.

Explain that a coalition is when different groups come together around shared issues and goals, while each group keeps its own identity and autonomy.

On a large piece of chart paper, draw a circle in the centre and write:

“Domestic Workers’ Groups”

Ask participants to map around the circle:

- Groups they are currently part of or work with
- Groups they have worked with in the past
- Groups they could work with in the future

Examples may include:

Trade unions, Worker collectives, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Legal aid and rights-based groups, Women’s groups, Migrant organisations, Care workers’ organisations, Human rights groups, Platforms or federations of workers (for example, the National Platform for Domestic Workers)

Once the map is complete, ask participants to discuss:

- Which groups feel most important right now?
- What shared issues could bring us together?

Ask the group to identify three priority groups. These may include organisations or collectives they already belong to.

## STEP 2: CHOOSING COALITION PRIORITIES AND ROLES

Divide participants into three groups, each focusing on one of the priority groups identified above.

Ask each group to discuss and note:

- What kind of support does this group offer domestic workers?
- What kind of influence or power does it have?
- What values must be shared for this coalition to work well?
- What could weaken or break this coalition?
- How can this group strengthen collective organising of domestic workers?

Encourage participants to consider the power, accountability, and leadership of domestic workers within these groups.

Close the exercise with a collective reflection:

- What becomes possible when domestic workers are part of coalitions rather than acting alone?
- How do coalitions help domestic workers challenge employers, RWAs, and the state more effectively?
- How can coalitions be strengthened?

## STEP 3: GROUP REFLECTION – WHAT MAKES COALITIONS WORK

Bring everyone back together and ask each group to share briefly.

As a facilitator, help the group identify:

- Common objectives around which coalitions can be built
- Shared values that are necessary for trust and sustainability

### NOTES FOR THE FACILITATORS

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- Reinforce that strong coalitions centre domestic workers' voices and leadership.
- Coalitions or collectivisation is most powerful when they are rooted in shared struggle, mutual respect, and feminist values of solidarity and accountability. Domestic workers gain strength when they organise together—and even more strength when their organisations stand in solidarity with others.
- Coalitions turn many small voices into a collective force capable of demanding dignity, rights, and justice.
- Emphasise that coalition building takes time, trust, and clear agreements.

## EXERCISE 3.3: STAKEHOLDER INFLUENCE MAPPING

*Understanding who has power and how change happens*

This exercise introduces participants to stakeholder mapping as a way of understanding how decisions that affect domestic workers are shaped by many different people and institutions, not just individual employers. It supports participants to identify who holds power over key issues such as wages, working hours, leave, and behaviour, and to reflect on how these power relationships influence their everyday lives.

Through collective discussion and mapping, the exercise encourages participants to see how acting together can shift power and strengthen domestic workers' voices. It also helps participants begin thinking strategically about how to engage different stakeholders collectively, rather than facing them alone, as part of broader organising and advocacy efforts.

*Time required: 60-75 minutes*

*Material required: Large sheet of paper or flipchart, Markers or pens, Small pieces of paper or paper circles (optional)*

*Process*

### STEP 1: IDENTIFY THE ISSUE

Begin by asking the group to agree on one common issue that the participants want to influence as domestic workers:

- Lack of a welfare board
- Lack of social protection
- Fair wages
- Access to bathrooms within apartment complexes
- Sexual harassment of domestic workers

Write the selected issue clearly at the top of the flip chart/ paper.

### STEP 2: IDENTIFY STAKEHOLDERS

Ask participants:

- Who is connected to this issue?
- Who makes decisions about it?
- Who has power over it?
- Who is affected by it?

List all the individuals and groups mentioned. These may include (there may be many others).

- Employers
- Employer families
- Placement agencies
- Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs)
- Government officials
- Police
- Domestic workers' collectives or unions
- NGOs or support organisations
- National Platform for Domestic Workers
- Religious Groups

Select the most relevant stakeholders for the exercise.

### STEP 3: REPRESENT GROUP SIZE

Ask participants to represent each stakeholder using circles:

- Bigger circles for larger groups
- Smaller circles for individuals or smaller groups

This helps highlight the difference between numbers and power.

#### STEP 4: DISCUSS STAKEHOLDER INFLUENCE

For each stakeholder, facilitate a discussion around:

- How much power do they have over this issue?
- Are they directly affected by the issue?
- Are they willing to listen or engage?
- Can they create problems if they are ignored?
- Who is absolutely necessary for the change to take place or the issue to be resolved?

Encourage discussion and shared reflection rather than ranking or scoring.

#### STEP 6: PRIORITISE KEY STAKEHOLDERS

(10–15 MINUTES)

In this final step, ask the group to identify three key stakeholders who are most important for addressing the issue they selected

Explain that not all stakeholders have the same kind of power or attitude. Some may have:

- High power but are not supportive (for example, employers or agencies)
- Low power but are supportive (for example, NGOs or community groups)
- Some influence and mixed attitudes (for example, RWAs or local officials)

Once the prioritisation is complete, bring the group together to reflect on what they see and what it means for collective action.

Guiding prompts for prioritisation

- Which stakeholders must domestic workers engage with as a group, not individually?
- Where do domestic workers need strength in numbers?
- Are there relationships that need to be built or strengthened?
- Are there stakeholders who should be approached carefully or indirectly?
- Who can help amplify domestic workers' voices, even if they do not have direct power?

#### STEP 5: MAP INFLUENCE AND WILLINGNESS

Draw a box divided into four parts:

- Left to right: Less influence → More influence
- Bottom to top: Less willingness → More willingness

Ask participants to place each stakeholder's circle in the box based on group discussion.

#### NOTES FOR FACILITATORS

Encourage the group to reflect on how collective action changes their position when dealing with powerful stakeholders, and how alliances can support them in difficult situations. Reinforce that prioritising stakeholders does not mean engaging with all of them at once; it is about choosing where collective energy and effort are most needed and most effective.

MODULE 5:

# Communication and Advocacy



This module strengthens participants' understanding of communication as a core organising and leadership practice within domestic workers' movements. It explores how power operates through both verbal and non-verbal communication, and how listening, dialogue, and collective communication become essential tools for organising, negotiating, and resolving conflict. Grounded in domestic workers' everyday realities, the module emphasises participation, clarity, and respectful engagement within collectives, while also supporting participants in developing communication and advocacy strategies to engage employers, RWAs, unions, allies, and government partners.

## Purpose

By the end of this module, participants will be able to:

- Understand communication as a tool for organising, leadership, and collective decision-making, not just individual interaction
- Identify common barriers to communication faced by domestic workers within collectives and in engagements with employers, RWAs, and institutions
- Use verbal and non-verbal communication more confidently and strategically in organising and negotiation contexts
- Practise dialogue and group communication skills that support participation, listening, and shared leadership
- Recognise how communication gaps and power imbalances can lead to conflict within collectives and organisations
- Use stakeholder mapping to identify key actors, power relations, and communication strategies for advocacy and negotiation



# Understanding Communication

This session introduces communication as a core skill for domestic worker leaders and collectives. It begins from everyday experiences to show that communication is not only about speaking, but about ensuring that messages are understood. Effective communication always involves both a sender and a receiver, and it depends on how words, tone, and body language work together. When any one of these is missing or unclear, misunderstandings can arise, weakening trust, participation, and collective action. All three work together, and communication is effective only when the sender and receiver share understanding.

By the end of this session, participants will:

- Understand communication as a two-way process that is essential for domestic worker leaders supporting and strengthening collectivisation.
- Recognise the difference between speaking, being heard, and being understood, and how this affects domestic workers' ability to influence decisions and support members of their organisations.
- Connect these experiences to real situations in domestic work, such as messages from employers, RWAs, or leaders.
- Recognise listening as a form of leadership and support, and understand that creating space for others to be heard is often as important as speaking in collective organising.
- Reflect on how communication practices can strengthen or weaken participation, cooperation, and shared leadership within collectives and unions.

## EXERCISE 1.1: "WHAT DID YOU HEAR?" – ACTIVE LISTENING

*Time required:* 1 hour

*Material required:* Chart paper, Markers, Small slips of paper (optional)

*Process:*

### STEP 1: OPENING REFLECTION

The session begins with a simple, open question posed to the full group about what comes to mind when they think of communication. As participants respond, the facilitator records their words on a chart where everyone can see them, capturing ideas such as talking, speaking, giving instructions, explaining, shouting, or sharing information. Once a range of responses has been noted, the facilitator pauses to invite reflection by asking whether these actions always ensure that the other person has understood what was said. After allowing a few brief responses, the facilitator uses this moment to highlight the key learning of the session: communication is not only about speaking or sending a message, but about making sure the message is understood.

### STEP 2: PAIRED LISTENING EXERCISE

Participants are asked to form pairs. The facilitator explains that in each pair, one person will speak while the other listens. Person A is invited to speak for about five minutes on a simple topic, such as something that made them happy recently, a difficulty they face at work or at home, or a challenge in their workplace. Person B is instructed to listen attentively without interrupting, reacting, or offering advice. After five minutes, Person B is asked to repeat what they understood from what was shared. The pairs then switch roles and repeat the exercise. During the activity, the facilitator moves quietly around the room, observing participants' body language, levels of attention, and any interruptions, and intervenes only if necessary.

### STEP 3: LARGE GROUP DEBRIEF

The facilitator brings the group back together and invites reflection on the paired exercise. Participants are asked how it felt to speak without being interrupted, how it felt to listen without responding, and whether it was easy or difficult to accurately repeat what the other person had shared. Speakers are also invited to reflect on how it felt to be listened to, what emotions came up, whether they felt supported or respected, and whether they felt genuinely understood. Participants are encouraged to share brief responses, and the facilitator notes keywords, emotions, and observations on the chart, including what they noticed about the other person's body language.

The facilitator then uses this reflection to reconnect the discussion to the key concepts of the session, emphasising that communication always involves both a sender and a receiver, and that being understood is just as important as speaking. The importance of empathy and active listening—giving full attention, suspending judgement, and trying to understand another person's experience—is highlighted as central to meaningful communication. The facilitator also points out how assumptions often replace careful listening in everyday interactions, leading to misunderstandings even when people believe they have communicated clearly, before allowing a few final responses and gently closing the session.

#### NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR:

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Emphasise that active listening means listening with full attention, care, and respect—not only to words, but also to feelings, silences, tone, and body language. It is about being present, not interrupting, and trying to understand what someone is experiencing, rather than rushing to respond or give advice. As a leader, it is very important to be an active listener as it is essential for building trust and connection.

From a feminist lens, active listening is an act of respect and solidarity, especially for people whose voices are often ignored or dismissed. Many domestic workers are not listened to in their homes, in their place of work or by public institutions that are meant to serve them. Practising active listening within collectives helps create spaces where people feel safe to speak, share, and organise together.

## ACTIVE LISTENING CHECKLIST

For facilitators and domestic worker leaders

Use this checklist during group discussions, meetings, or one-to-one conversations.

Before engaging with another person

- Am I fully present, or am I distracted?
- Have I created a safe and respectful space to speak?
- Am I open to listening without judgement or assumptions?

During the conversation

- Am I allowing the person to speak without interruption?
- Am I paying attention to tone, emotions, and body language, not just words?
- Am I listening to understand, not to correct or respond quickly?
- Am I showing care through eye contact, posture, or small gestures?

After the conversation is over

- Did I reflect back what I heard to check understanding?
- Did I ask gentle questions to clarify, not challenge?
- Did the speaker feel heard and respected?

In collective spaces

- Am I making space for quieter voices?
- Am I preventing one or two people from dominating the discussion?
- Am I linking what I heard to collective issues and action?

Feminist reflection

- Did my listening help share power rather than control it?
- Did it strengthen trust, care, and solidarity in the group?

## EXERCISE 1.2: UNDERSTANDING NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

*Time required:* 45 – 60 minutes

*Material required:* A room or large space that allows the participant to move about

*Process*

### STEP 1: FORM GROUPS AND SET THE TASK

Participants are divided into two groups, Group A and Group B

Group A is asked to think of a real situation from their own lives as domestic workers. This could be (indicative only; they should come up with their own situations):

- A conversation with an employer
- A conversation with their local government authorities
- A moment of support or conflict with another worker
- Ask them to create a short scene based on this experience.

Within the group, each participant takes on a different role in the scene and expresses a different emotion, such as fear, anger, confidence, tiredness, care, or silence. The facilitator clearly explains that the scene must be enacted without spoken words and that emotions should be conveyed only through body language, facial expressions, posture, and movement. Group A is then given a few minutes to practise the scene silently.

### STEP 3: OBSERVATION AND INTERPRETATION

Participants in Group B are asked to quietly observe the frozen scene and note:

- What roles they think are being played
- What emotions they see in each person
- What body signals helped them

understand the emotions

Group A is then asked to relax and sit down, after which participants from Group A share the role they were playing and the emotion they were trying to express.

The facilitator guides a brief comparison between what Group A intended and what Group B understood.

### STEP 2: ENACTMENT

When the facilitator says “Start,” Group A begins enacting the scene without speaking. After a short while, when the facilitator says “Statue,” each participant in Group A freezes immediately and holds a body position that clearly expresses the emotion of the role they are playing.

### STEP 4: SWITCH ROLES

The activity is then repeated with Group B creating and enacting a silent scene, while Group A observes.

## NOTES FOR FACILITATOR

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Invite participants to reflect on body language, facial expressions, and the clarity of gestures they observed, and how these communicated emotions or intentions. Emphasise that while verbal communication is powerful, it has limitations, and effective communication requires balancing non-verbal cues with clear verbal expression. Nonverbal communication—eye contact, smiling, and hand gestures—strongly influences how people interpret and respond to information.

Link this directly to domestic workers' experiences by discussing how communication is often gendered and shaped by power—for example, who is allowed to sit, speak, make eye contact, raise their voice, or move freely at work—who dominates the space, who feels confident enough to take up room, and who is expected to remain silent or restrained. Ask them to reflect on how employers or authorities may use posture, silence, or looks to assert dominance and control.

## NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

*What we say without words*

**Non-verbal communication** is the way we communicate **without speaking or writing**.

It includes body language, facial expressions, gestures, posture, tone of voice, silence, distance between people, and even how we stand, sit, or move. Often, these messages are sent and received **without us realising it**.

For domestic workers, non-verbal communication plays a powerful role at work and in public spaces—through looks, gestures, silence, or control over space. Many times, emotions like fear, disrespect, anger, or confidence are communicated without words.

### **Why non-verbal communication matters:**

- **It conveys feelings:** A large part of emotional meaning is communicated non-verbally. Even when words are polite, body language can show anger, control, or care.
- **It shapes relationships:** Non-verbal cues often show who has power and who does not—who can sit, who must stand, who can speak, and who must wait.
- **It reveals truth:** People may hide feelings in words, but emotions often “leak” through body language, tone, or silence.
- **It depends on context:** The same gesture or silence can mean different things depending on the situation—at work, at home, in a meeting, or in public.
- **It is culture-bound:** Body language and gestures can mean different things in different communities and regions. What is acceptable in one context may not be in another.
- **It is gendered:** Women, especially domestic workers, are often expected to control their bodies and emotions—smile, stay quiet, appear grateful—while others are allowed to show authority or anger.

## EXERCISE 1.3: UNDERSTANDING MESSAGE DISTORTION (“CHINESE WHISPER”)

*Time Required:* 30 minutes

*Material Required:* Open space for participants to sit or stand in a line or circle

Process:

### STEP 1: PREPARE THE MESSAGE

The facilitator writes one short sentence on a slip of paper and asks one participant to read it silently. The participant is instructed not to show the sentence to anyone and to whisper it only once to the next person

### STEP 2: PASS THE MESSAGE

Participants are asked to form a line or a circle. The first participant whispers the message to the next person, and each participant passes it on only once. No repetition, questions, or corrections are allowed during the process.

### STEP 3: REVEAL THE FINAL MESSAGE

The facilitator asks the last participant to read the message aloud and then reads the original message to the group. Participants are invited to reflect on what they observed, including how the message changed, which details disappeared or were altered, whether new information was added, and how the overall meaning shifted.

The facilitator then guides a discussion on communication distortion and its impact. Participants are encouraged to reflect on how different the final message was from the original:

- What details changed or disappeared
- What new information was added
- How the meaning shifted

The discussion also explores whether participants felt unsure but still passed the message on, and why distortion may have occurred, including the role of fear, doubt, pressure, simplification, or assumptions. As the conversation continues, the facilitator notes key words and ideas on a chart and helps the group connect these insights to real situations in domestic workers’ lives, such as unclear instructions, rumours, miscommunication from employers or RWAs, and the absence of feedback or clarification.

### NOTES FOR THE FACILITATORS:

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The purpose of this discussion is to help participants understand the consequences of message distortion and how it often leads to them being misunderstood or misrepresented. It also supports participants to link everyday experiences of miscommunication to broader power relations in domestic work, recognising that such distortions are often structural rather than accidental. The facilitator should focus on drawing out how lack of clarity, control over communication channels, and unequal power benefit some actors while disadvantaging domestic workers, and on acknowledging the emotional impact of not being heard, believed, or understood.

- In what situations do domestic workers experience messages being changed, misunderstood, or taken very differently from what was intended? Are there spaces where your words are ignored, twisted, or spoken for by others?
- Through which channels do information about your work—such as wages, hours, leave, or rules—usually travel (for example, employers, contractors, RWAs, leaders, WhatsApp groups)? How much control do you feel you have over these communication channels?
- What happens when information about working conditions or payment is unclear, incomplete, or passed on incorrectly?
- Who benefits from this lack of clarity, and who bears the cost?
- Who is most affected when messages are distorted or not passed on at all?
- How does it feel when your message is not heard, not believed, or not understood as you intended?

## COMMUNICATION, POWER, AND DISTORTION

Communication is often distorted because some voices are valued more than others. Domestic workers' voices are frequently ignored, misunderstood, or spoken for—by employers, institutions, or the media—rather than listened to directly.

Many domestic workers have to explain their lives and problems using the language and rules set by others. When domestic work is seen as “natural,” “unskilled,” or private, workers' knowledge and experiences are devalued. This changes the meaning of what they say and weakens their voice.

Distortion also happens when domestic workers are invisible or stereotyped—seen only as helpers, servants, or migrants, instead of workers with rights and leadership. The experiences of some domestic workers, shaped by caste, class, religion, or migration, are often ignored even within women's spaces, making their struggles harder to speak about.

From a feminist lens, communication distortion is about power:  
who is allowed to speak,  
who is believed,  
and whose experiences are treated as truth.

This is why listening, collective voice, and organising matter. When domestic workers speak together, support one another, and organise collectively, they reduce distortion and begin to change how power works.

# From Silence to Solidarity: Building Effective Communication Skills

This session brings together three activities that support domestic workers in examining how power shapes communication in everyday life and in collective spaces. It helps participants identify the barriers that prevent them from speaking freely at work, at home, and in public settings, and to recognise that these barriers are not personal shortcomings but are rooted in unequal power relations and social norms.

Through observation, reflection, and practice, the session enables participants to notice how power operates in group communication—who speaks, who remains silent, and why. Participants are encouraged to reflect on how factors such as gender, confidence, fear, seniority, and status influence participation, and to build awareness that communication in groups is never neutral but reflects wider inequalities experienced by domestic workers in their workplaces and communities. The session also creates space to practise more inclusive, feminist ways of communicating within collectives, unions, and meetings, strengthening shared leadership and solidarity.

## EXERCISE 2.1: “WHAT STOPS US FROM SPEAKING?”

*Time required:* 45-60 minutes

*Material required:* Chart paper or brown paper, Markers or sketch pens

*Process*

### STEP 1: FORM SMALL GROUPS

Divide participants into 3–4 small groups.  
Ensure each group has a mix of ages and experiences.

### STEP 2: GROUP DISCUSSION

Ask each group to discuss:  
“A situation when you find it difficult to speak or ask questions?”  
What was the situation? What was the reason why you find it difficult to speak up or ask?  
Groups write or draw these on chart paper.

### STEP 3: GROUP PRESENTATIONS

Each group presents its chart. As groups present, the facilitator writes the barriers identified on a central chart, grouping them under simple headings such as:

- Fear
- Power differences
- Lack of information
- Language or confidence

### STEP 4: COLLECTIVE REFLECTION

The whole group reflects on:

- Which barriers do many of us share?
- Are these barriers created by us, or by the situation?
- Do employers face the same barriers?

## NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR

- Do not push participants to share personal stories.
- Normalise silence as a survival strategy, not a failure.
- Gently name power—employer, money, caste, gender—without blaming individuals.
- Use simple words; avoid technical terms like “assertiveness.”

## EXERCISE 2: WHO GETS TO SPEAK? WHO GETS HEARD?

*Power, voice, and understanding in domestic workers' lives*

### Purpose

This activity helps domestic workers reflect on:

- How power, gender, class, and work status shape who can speak freely and who cannot
- The difference between speaking and being heard or understood
- How silence, fear, and misunderstanding operate in everyday work interactions
- Why collective spaces are important for voice, dignity, and organising

*Time required: 50–60 minutes*

*Materials required: Chart paper, Markers, (Optional) picture cards showing home or work situations*

### Process

#### Part 1: Who Gets to Speak? (15 minutes)

##### STEP 1: MAPPING VOICE AND SILENCE

On a chart paper, draw two columns:

- Can Speak Freely
- Cannot Speak Freely

Ask participants to name roles, not real people, from their lives. For example:

- Employer
- Contractor
- Husband / partner
- Elder in the family
- Domestic worker
- Union leader
- RWA member

Write each role under one or both columns, based on what the group says.

##### STEP 2: GROUP REFLECTION

Guide the group through a discussion on what strengthens voice and produces silence:

- Who speaks without fear?
- Who must think many times before speaking?
- What happens when people with less power speak?
- Are some people listened to more than others, even if they say the same thing?

#### Part 2: Speaking vs Being Understood (35–40 minutes)

##### STEP 3: OPENING CONVERSATION

Ask the group:

- When you talk to your employer, supervisor, or contractor, what do you usually talk about?

Write responses on the chart and then ask:

- When you speak, do you feel you are understood?

##### STEP 4: PAIRED ROLE-PLAY

Ask participants to form pairs.

- One person plays a domestic worker
- The other plays an employer / supervisor / contractor

Ask each group to choose a scenario.

##### ROUND 1 (2–3 MINUTES):

- The worker speaks
- The employer responds as they usually would

##### ROUND 2 (2–3 MINUTES):

- Switch roles

## STEP 5: GROUP REFLECTION

Bring everyone back together and ask:

- How did it feel to speak as a worker?
- How did it feel to be in the employer's role?
- Did the listener really listen, or only react?

Write keywords participants say on the chart paper, wall, whiteboard.

Facilitate a final group discussion on what can be done to strengthen domestic workers' voices. Emphasise that collective spaces—unions, groups, and meetings—are where domestic workers can speak, be heard, and build power together.

- Is silence always a choice?
- When does silence become a survival strategy?
- How does being a woman and a worker make speaking riskier?
- What changes when domestic workers speak together, not alone?
- What are the spaces where they can speak freely?
- What could have changed in the previous scenarios if the individual workers were accompanied by others?

## EXERCISE 3: FISHBOWL DISCUSSION: GROUP COMMUNICATION AND POWER DYNAMICS

*Who speaks, who listens, and how power shows up in groups*

*Time required: 60 minutes*

*Process*

### **STEP 1: SETTING UP THE FISHBOWL**

Explain the fishbowl method:

Divide participants into two groups:

- Inner circle (Fishbowl) – active speakers
- Outer circle (Observers) – silent observers

Arrange chairs so that the inner circle sits in the centre, with the outer circle around them.

Emphasise:

- The inner circle will speak freely
- The outer circle will only observe, not interrupt or react

### **STEP 3: OBSERVATION BY THE OUTER CIRCLE (DURING DISCUSSION)**

- Give the observers these guiding questions (written on a chart or read aloud):
- Who spoke the most?
- Who spoke very little or not at all?
- Who interrupted or dominated the conversation?
- Were quieter people encouraged to speak?
- Did people listen respectfully, or dismiss others' views?
- Did someone take on a leadership or facilitator role? How?
- Ask observers to focus on patterns, not individuals.

If time allows, switch roles so that the observers become the speakers and repeat the activity with a new topic.

### **STEP 2: FISHBOWL DISCUSSION**

Give the inner circle a discussion topic. Choose a topic that encourages reflection on power, gender, or organising, for example:

- “Women are women’s enemies – do you agree or disagree?”
- In domestic workers’ lives, some conditions weaken collective action while others enable solidarity and cooperation. – discuss
- Differences in experience, background (such as caste, religion, migration status, language spoken, and age) influence whose voices are heard and whose labour and leadership are recognised within domestic workers’ movements.

Allow the inner circle to discuss without facilitator intervention.

### **STEP 4: REFLECTION BY OBSERVERS**

After the discussion, invite the outer circle to share what they noticed.

- Guide them to reflect on:
- Dominance and silence
- Listening versus speaking
- Inclusion and exclusion
- How leadership showed up (or did not)

## NOTES TO THE FACILITATOR:

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The facilitator should emphasise that silence in meetings or collective actions does not mean a lack of ideas, experience, or leadership. Feminist leadership in organising spaces creates room for many voices, not only the loudest or most confident, and recognises that meetings often mirror existing power and hierarchy. Who speaks, who is interrupted, and who stays silent in collective spaces matters, and leadership can be practised by listening, inviting others to contribute, and holding space so participation is shared. Inclusive communication in meetings and actions strengthens collectives, builds trust, and makes organising more effective and sustainable. Use the observations to guide a deeper discussion:

- How do similar power dynamics show up in domestic workers' meetings or unions?
- Who feels confident speaking in front of employers, RWAs, or officials—and who does not?
- How do caste, age, migration status, or length of work affect who speaks?
- How does fear of consequences shape silence?

## BOX 14: CHECKLIST FOR MAKING MEETINGS MORE INCLUSIVE

For domestic workers' collectives and unions

Before and during meetings, ask:

- Are all participants given a chance to speak, not only the confident or senior ones?
- Are quieter voices gently invited in, without pressure or judgement?
- Is anyone interrupting, dominating, or dismissing others?
- Are people listening respectfully, even when they disagree?
- Is language being used that everyone can understand?
- Are decisions explained clearly and checked for understanding?
- Is leadership shared—through facilitation, note-taking, or summarising?
- Are caste, age, migration status, or fear affecting who speaks?

Reminder:

An inclusive meeting is not one where everyone speaks the same amount, but one where everyone feels respected, heard, and safe to participate.





