



# Domestic Workers Organise for their Recognition and Rights: The SEWA Process

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## Preface

“I feel so privileged to be part of the SEWA union. I have learnt so much after becoming a member. I was so tied down with my work and home responsibilities earlier that I never thought about myself as a worker and my rights and responsibilities in the society. In fact, I was not proud to be a '*naukrani*' but now I am not ashamed to say I am a domestic worker. I have even gained confidence to not only stand up for my rights but to also bring other women into the union and to take up their issues as well. If we are united, we can achieve so much” says Prathimaben, a domestic worker in Delhi. She echoes the feelings of several other domestic workers in SEWA who over the past decade have been organizing.

The story of this organizing which commenced in Kerala in the mid-1980s, was taken forward and expanded in the SEWA network, with the support of the IDWF (International Domestic Workers Federation) and the ILO (International Labour Organization), the story of which has been put together by an intern, Sophie Metcalfe, from all the reports that were provided to her. I must add here that there was very little exchange between Sophie and myself, a couple of hours at the most. She had no former exposure to this subject. So I must commend her for taking the trouble to plod through all the reports and write this story in the span of two months. Thank you, Sophie, as this story is now available for all in the SEWA family and other friends to read.

I must add here that although the organizing work among domestic workers is ongoing, this is the story up to November 2019.

I thank all my colleagues in SEWA who have committed themselves to this task of organizing domestic workers, Renana Jhabvala, who read the document and made important comments and members of the SEWA Bharat Learning Hub who did the final editing.

Nalini Nayak  
Programme Coordinator  
June 2021



## Background

Recognizing the need for measures to protect and value the domestic workers as workers, on 16th June 2011, the International Labour Organization adopted 'Convention 189'. The legally binding document was adopted after a long international struggle by the domestic workers and their advocates. This convention recognises the domestic workers as *workers*, which didn't happen before. The convention also sheds light on how unprotected and undervalued the domestic workers are. The convention binds all the countries which ratify the convention to ensure that the domestic workers receive fundamental labour rights inclusive of the following:

- The right to collective bargaining
- The right to fair and clear terms of employment
- The right to safe and healthy work environment
- The right to the same social security protections as other workers
- The right of migrant domestic workers to safe passage and decent working conditions.
- Elimination of forced, compulsory and child labour
- Decent working conditions
- Equality with other workers in terms of minimum wage, hours, overtime, rest, and annual leave
- Protection against all forms of abuse, harassment or violence
- Protection against exploitative private employment agencies

This was a testament to the hard work and campaigning of the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) formed in 2009 when regional groups from various networks and coalitions of domestic workers in Asia (ADWN), Latin America and the Caribbean (CONLACTRAHO), the USA (NDWA), South Africa (SADSAWU), Indonesia (Jala-Prt), Peru (I PROFOTH) and Trinidad and Tobago (NUDE) all over the world along with SEWA which made the Convention 189 happen. After C189 was adopted, the IDWN became the International Domestic Workers Federation in October 2013. The federation became stronger working with 75 affiliates in 58 countries, uniting around 560,000 domestic worker members in a common mission to protect them and empower them with their rights. C189 has now been ratified by over 32 countries as a result of these efforts, an immense achievement. However, still over 150 countries including India have not ratified the convention.

SEWA Kerala first began to organise domestic workers in the mid-1980s. When the National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM) began to campaign nationally for the rights of domestic workers around 2009, SEWA was a part of the National Taskforce for Domestic Workers, which was set up by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India.



The goals of this task force were two-fold:

1. To recommend welfare and regulatory mechanisms which promote decent work for domestic workers; and
2. To collaboratively write an India Paper for presentation/consideration during the 99th Session of ILC<sup>1</sup> in Geneva, June 2010.

Some key successes achieved by the task force are:

- Approval of the proposal of extending the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojna (RSBY), a health insurance policy for the Indian poor programme, to the domestic workers.
- The Ministry of Labour and Employment wrote to the State Chief Secretaries and Principal Labour Secretaries requesting minimum wage rights for the domestic workers
- The placement agencies were to be required to register under the Shops and Establishment Act
- And, submitting a Draft National Policy for Domestic Workers. Unfortunately, this policy was not tabled in Parliament.

### National Platform for Domestic Workers

The passing of ILO Convention 189 provided a stimulus to a large number of smaller domestic worker organisations that had by then mushroomed all over the country. After realizing that getting the Government of India to ratify C189 would be an uphill task and would require a national movement of domestic workers, SEWA came together with other allies and in 2012 a National Platform for Domestic Workers was set up. Several domestic worker unions and member-based organizations including three central unions - SEWA, AITUC, and TUCU were a part of this platform. The platform together advocated for Comprehensive National Legislation to protect the rights of domestic workers. SEWA has been coordinating this Platform till date.

The members of this platform have been highly effective in organising large-scale national events which raise awareness of domestic workers' plight; the first of these was a mass signature campaign, culminating in a Public Dharna on 31st July 2013 where the signatures were submitted to the President and the Petitions Committee of Parliament. Yet still no national policy emerged. With the hope that the Draft National Policy for Domestic Workers would be implemented under the new government, after the general election in 2014 the platform doubled its efforts in advocating for the policy. The initial steps included a) building state-level platforms of organisations supporting domestic workers, b) joining advocates together in solidarity to campaign on state-level issues such as minimum wages, weekly offs, and state legislation. Alongside these state-level campaigns, a National Public Hearing for Domestic Workers was organised in order to highlight the injustices faced by domestic workers at the hands of their employers, which took place at Indian Statistical Institute (ISI), New Delhi on 11th November 2014. Around 25 comprehensive case studies collected as affidavits were compiled for this hearing which substantiated domestic workers' stories of

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<sup>1</sup> International Labour Conference



non-wage payment, false allegations of theft, unfair dismissal, unjust working conditions, and violence and harassment at the hands of their employers. Of these, seven then testified formally before a Jury, including Ms Lilita Kumar Mangalam (Chairperson, National Commission for Women), Shri P.M. Nair (Retired IPS who previously worked on anti-trafficking protocols), Shri S.C. Srivatsava (Member, National Law Association), Shri Mallahan (Inspector, Delhi Police), Smt. Mohuya Choudhry (Journalist) and Shri Shehnsah Ali (Secretary to Resident Commissioner, Jharkhand State). After these testimonies, an expert panel including Dr Omkar Sharma (Assistant Labour Commissioner) and Ms Bharti Birla (International Labour Organisation) then responded, highlighting existing legislation supporting domestic workers, whilst acknowledging the need for a Vigilance Committee, social security laws, and separate legislation for domestic workers.

The Jury came to the following conclusion: “That vulnerable women, who provide such an indispensable service to us are treated in such horrendous ways is a challenge to those of us who hold responsibility in government. Keeping in mind that the Indian Government has voted in favour of Convention 189, it is only a natural requirement that measures are taken to protect them. We therefore feel the following steps should be taken as soon as possible:

1. Domestic workers must be included in existing labour laws.
2. Placement agencies must be regulated by a specific administrative order from the Ministry of Labour.
3. A specific law is required to regulate human trafficking of workers from different states. A national coordinating body should be established which maintains a database of workers’ information so they are protected from trafficking.
4. The Ministry of Labour should put in place a support system for the victims of physical and verbal abuse and harassment. A helpline number for domestic workers in distress should be created for support, and a redress mechanism at the city, block and district level should be implemented whereby issues relating to salary, abuse or harassment can be negotiated.
5. Domestic workers should organise vigilance committees to support those who are ill-treated.
6. Attempts should be made to harness the power of the media to spread awareness about domestic workers’ issues.
7. Efforts need to be made to sensitise police, district and jail administration officials about issues related to domestic workers by organising workshops at different levels.
8. Particular note should be taken of those children who are made to engage in domestic work, as child domestic labour is illegal.
9. The Government of India should create a Comprehensive Legislation to safeguard the rights of these workers.

This public hearing was therefore highly successful in raising awareness of domestic workers’ issues, and generating unity and courage amongst domestic workers to take their struggle forwards; however, still as of 2021 no national comprehensive legislation for



domestic workers exists in India. In fact, the new Labour Codes that the government is putting in place makes no mention of the domestic workers at all and even specifically excludes from the Health and Safety Code.

### Case Study 1 : Excessive overtime and abusive working conditions

I am Kanchan Devi living with my parents and younger sister in Viravarpur, Ghorghat, Bihar. I am currently working as a SEWA Saathi with their Solar project. My mother, my younger sister and I worked very hard to make our ends meet and my father could not earn because of his illness. My mother and younger sister worked as domestic workers at various houses. My sister Soni had to start working at a very young age of 10 years old. She worked at a powerful person's house in Biryapur, away from us. At first she was asked to work for smaller time periods and cleaning the utensils and other smaller tasks, as time passed she was asked to do more work and she ended up working continuously 5 AM in the morning as soon as she woke up to 11 PM at night till she went to sleep. Her communication and meetings with us were restricted, she wasn't even allowed to take a leave of some days and spend some time with her family during the festivals. My father always returned without her when he went to the town to bring her home. After some time had passed, my sister started feeling unwell. Even then she wasn't allowed to go home and take some rest. Eventually she fell so ill that she couldn't move out of her bed. Her employer tried to get some treatment for her, but when they couldn't get her working, they called my father to pick up my sister from their home. Her treatment began in Bariyapur, close to our home and when she did not show any signs of improvement we were referred to Bhagalpur and then to Patna. But her health never seemed to get better. After a long and hard journey with the illness she died in 2012, killing the soul of our family too. My father began to isolate himself even when Soni was alive, didn't speak much with any of us and suffered alone. After she died, we wanted to file a complaint against her employer for inhumane treatment my sister received and she would have been alive if she would have got early treatment. Given the powerful family they were, and the poor family we were, we had to keep our anger aside and keep looking for ways to make our ends meet. It was only then I met Geeta ben in Bariyapur. She introduced me to SEWA and informed me about my rights and entitlements. Today, I work as a SEWA sathi.

*Case Study 1: Excessive overtime and abusive working conditions*

### SEWA Kerala and Their Work

Alongside these national efforts, SEWA Kerala began working with SEWA Delhi to particularly understand and support the plight of migrant domestic workers. Simultaneously, they undertook a study commissioned by the ILO to understand which domestic workers migrate, why and how they migrate, experiences of migration, and the nature and implications of legislative and institutional frameworks surrounding migration along two key domestic worker migration routes: the Kerala-Arabian Gulf route, and the internal Jharkhand-Delhi route. SEWA interviewed 25 potential migrant workers along each route, 25 returned migrant workers from each route, and 25 migrant workers who have been working in Delhi for at least 2 years, alongside informal interviews with employers, agency staff, domestic workers'





organizations, and police and government officials. They used this knowledge to produce the report 'Indispensable Yet Unprotected' for the ILO in 2012. This not only contributed to the knowledge about the forced labour and trafficking of Indian domestic workers both internally and across borders, it also allowed SEWA subsequently to build an extensive knowledge of and links with domestic workers, providing SEWA with an excellent base from which to unionise domestic workers to collectively struggle for fundamental labour rights and safe and decent migration.

### Case Study 2: Abuse by an Employer

50 years old Shaila Dei from Purighat Bauri Sahi, Odisha reports her story as follows: I am a domestic worker and my husband is unemployed due to his illness. I have two children. I have been a domestic worker for the last twenty years. For one and a half years, I worked in a house as a caretaker and house maid. I took care of the children; I bathed them, fed them and prepared them for school etc. I worked from 10-11:30am in the morning and 6-7pm in the evening each day. I was getting fifteen hundred from this house as my monthly salary. Last February (2015), one morning I was putting powder on the body of the child. Suddenly the owner came and saw me and said 'why are you wasting powder?'. Then I replied politely, saying 'maa I am using what you gave me four days ago – I am not wasting'. Then, the owner's husband came and asked why I was arguing with his wife, so I responded explaining the situation. The owner then came to me and pushed me and I fell on the floor. I was injured and in severe pain, but nobody came to help me. I was crying, and the owner's sister-in-law came over and laughingly said I was faking an injury. Then I requested to call my son from her mobile which she agreed to. My son came to the house, and the owner said 'your mother had a headache so she fell over and you need to take her to the medical centre'. My son took me there and after doing an X-Ray the doctor told me that I had a fracture. I was unable to work after that. I belong to a poor family and my financial condition is very bad. I have no money for my treatment. I went to the police station to complain but they took no action. Now I have no work and I am also still suffering.

#### *Case Study 2: Abuse from an employer*

With the lack of any official data on domestic workers in India, SEWA-Kerala undertook another study backed by the Kudumbashree Network (an extensive grassroots female empowerment programme funded by the Kerala government) which quantitatively assessed the location of domestic workers in Kerala, gathering data across 5 districts from 178,820 respondents to conclude that 25% of all poor women between the age of 18-60 in Kerala are domestic workers – a much higher percentage than previously conceived. A further public hearing of migrant workers in Kerala was also organised in October 2013, with 7 female domestic workers testifying harrowing stories to the Jury of being cheated by agents, exploited and abused by employers, neglected by the Indian embassy, hounded by the police and even imprisoned abroad, with no protection as they migrated illegally. The Jury was chaired by Dr. Nivedita P. Haran (Indian Administrative Services, Kerala Labour Secretary), and convened by Justice Hariharan Nair and the following members: Mr P C John (Member of the State Planning Board), Mr R S Kannan (Secretary of NORKA), Mr Kanam Rajendram (Secretary AITUC), and Dr Praveena Kodoth (Associate Professor, Centre for Development Studies).



Some government department personnel present were surprised to hear of these traumatic events, although the Crime Branch opined that women workers themselves knowingly fall into these traps. Subsequently, both the Department of Emigration and the Crime Branch have partnered with SEWA to plug some of the loopholes and spread awareness among workers. However, this continues to be an uphill task as the battle SEWA has had from the very start in convincing institutions that migrant domestic workers are workers, deserving of rights and state protections, is still not fully achieved.

### **Case Study 3: Abusing Working Condition and Vulnerability as a Migrant**

Nabeesa (50), from Mallapuram, Kerala had no idea about her rights. She went abroad through an agent and was placed for work. She worked from 5a.m. to 11 p.m., cooking, cleaning and ironing for the family and their guests. If things were not done well, she was rudely scolded. She was given only leftovers for food and could eat only when she managed to find the time. When she was sick with fever and did not work, a week's wages were deducted. She was not allowed to talk to other workers in the house. There was an old man she had to attend to – giving medication on time and taking him to the toilet. He used to harass her physically. One of the children had special educational needs and used to throw things at her. The lady employer slapped her a few times when unsatisfied with her work. She tolerated this for a year, since she had paid a lot for her visa and needed to earn money for her family.

#### *Case Study 3: Abusing Working Conditions and Vulnerability as a Migrant*

In 2014, the ILO in partnership with the Department for International Development (DFID), launched the 'Work in Freedom' Programme<sup>2</sup> together with two other international partners: the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) and the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW). The IDWF nominated SEWA as its implementing member. This campaign aims to reduce the vulnerability of women and girls in South Asia and the Middle East to trafficking by supporting informed migration, fair recruitment and decent work.

This report summarises the SEWA story of organising domestic workers through three key programmes:

1. The ILO 'Work In Freedom' Programme 2014 - Present
2. An ILO Impact Assessment of an intensive intervention in Ganjam, building understandings of successful intervention methodologies 2014-2016

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<sup>2</sup> The Work in Freedom is an integrated programme launched by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in partnership with Department for International Development (DFID), United Kingdom, to support mobility by choice among women and girls from destination countries (India, Bangladesh and Nepal) to decent jobs with safety and dignity of workers in destination countries (India, Lebanon and Jordan) through fair recruitment processes.



3. Projects conducted in partnership with the IDWF-OPC (Olof Palme Centre) and Bread for the World (BFW) which empowers domestic workers to join together in solidarity to fight for their rights.

Each of these programmes had different individual goals and objectives, yet are united by their common mission of empowering domestic workers through advocacy, legislation, building collectives, skill development, supporting safe migration, and preventing trafficking.



## Organising, Empowering and Advocating for the Domestic Workers

The overarching aim of the ILO's Work In Freedom programme is to prevent the trafficking of women and girls for domestic work, both within India and across its borders. In its first phase, lasting from January 2014 to June 2018, this was achieved through three key objectives across the 6 states of Bihar, Delhi, Kerala, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.

1. Women domestic workers are sensitised on their rights and work and have an increased collective strength and representation in target states in India
2. Women domestic workers' skills are enhanced and their rights are better advocated in public policy fora.
3. Domestic workers' organisations, related women's organisations, local panchayat and labour officers are better informed and able to take effective action on issues of trafficking and safe migration

SEWA created a team of one Coordinator and one Assistant Coordinator at the national level and two state coordinators in Orissa and Kerala. Aside from these, each state had just two field organisers, except Orissa which had five – one for each district.

### Organizing Domestic Workers in Existing Trade Unions

The first step to organise the domestic workers is to identify and locate them. The domestic workers, after being located, were contacted to explain to them the need to be a part of existing trade unions. The major challenge was availability of the domestic workers as they are extremely busy and scattered, with live-in domestic workers particularly difficult to locate. The SEWA team worked hard to identify key areas within their states where domestic workers resided and worked, and organised local units where domestic workers could meet, discuss their issues and organise to put pressure on employers and the government. Through this work, over time meetings became better attended as domestic workers realised that organising together in a union brought greater visibility and collective strength to achieve their rights. The initial issue organisers encountered was stigma. Domestic workers, especially those who have migrated, did not want to admit to being domestic workers as it was seen as low status. In response to this, SEWA extensively educated local communities within the six states, emphasizing that domestic work has dignity and is an invaluable service which contributes significantly to the economy; this not only helped galvanise domestic workers to fight for their rights, but also meant that there was greater openness about the fact that women do domestic work and migrate for domestic work. This was further supported by reaching out to migrant domestic workers through those who had already joined the SEWA union and become more empowered, tackling stigma at a grassroots level. As a result of this organising, by May 2016 after just 2.5 years the SEWA union had already far exceeded its target of 5,000 additional members since January 2014.



## Building a Representative Organisation of Domestic Workers in Orissa

SEWA initially had no base in Orissa, presenting a challenge. The National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO) was a platform of women's groups in Orissa that worked to prevent the trafficking of women. NAWO was happy to partner with SEWA and develop the perspective of assisting the women in their work or as workers. SEWA decided to work with five local partners of NAWO, Solidarity for Developing Communities (SFDC), Lutheran World Service (LWS), Aaina, Pratikar and Pragati. Each partner worked with domestic workers in different districts, covering 87 slums, 98 villages and 13 wards overall across the districts of Cuttack, Kandhamal, Sundargarh, Gajapati, and Khorda. SEWA ploughed ahead with the organising and made very good progress. Within just 2 months from February – April 2014, the partners completed: baseline surveys of migrant domestic workers, case study collections, discussions with local domestic workers to identify issues, interactions with the panchayat and Block Development Officers, and the beginnings of community mobilisation through local meetings.

One key part of this early strategy was an action research study undertaken by community organisers to both map the number and location of women engaging in domestic work and collect case studies to gain a first-hand understanding of the issues migrant domestic workers face. This allowed organisers to understand: the many reasons why female domestic workers across Orissa migrate, the risks of abuse and issues they face during migration, the flaws in government legislation and anti-trafficking cells, the long-term poverty which many returned migrants continue to face, the particular vulnerability of young women who have dropped out of school to placement agents who cheat and exploit them, and the need for legislative, institutional and educational changes moving forwards to make migration safer for domestic workers. Furthermore, alongside information gathering, this study allowed SEWA leaders to introduce themselves to local communities where organising work could commence, beginning the process of identifying local women leaders and developing local advocacy programmes.

Alongside this study, a further key goal for SEWA was working with NAWO and the five local partners to build a confident and skilled organizing team. This was made possible through input sessions (three two-day SEWA sessions, one ILO session, and two further feedback and planning sessions) and two major visits by the National Coordinator to each of the field locations. During her visits the coordinator, tracked the progress of the partner teams and advised them on various soft skills of developing the membership base, interaction with the authorities, and empowering women leaders through their union. This in particular helped the NGOs understand the SEWA method of empowering domestic workers to build their own organisation and how unionising leads to collectively making public demands to achieve their rights.

After the initial surveys locating migrant domestic workers, the partners in Orissa set about building awareness of C189 and safe migration (assisted by SEWA through the input sessions and materials developed) and highlighting the importance of organising, through a variety of media, including: community meetings, school presentations, public puppet shows, written material, poster exhibitions, public celebrations of International Domestic Workers Day and



International Migrant Workers Day, and meetings in conjunction with panchayat and other local government staff. This work was highly successful in all districts except Bhubaneswar, where NAWO faced the difficulties of working in an urban space for the first time and consequently struggled to organise public events since they did not have a large enough public support base yet. Nevertheless, already by December 2015, 11,174 people from both rural and urban areas had been educated about C189 and safe migration by the Orissa team – an impressive outreach. Furthermore, after initially introducing the concept of safe migration, SEWA-Orissa impressed on internal migrants that they should contact the local SEWA union at their destination (typically Kerala or Delhi), thus reducing the chances of female domestic workers being cheated by agents or not receiving their wages since the local SEWA unit could help them.

#### Case Study 4: Deception by Placement Agents

Pinky Paricha, a woman aged 22 years, belonged to a very poor and underprivileged family, residing in Surada block in Ganjam district of Odisha. She has struggled for the past 6 years, working in different cities and under awful situations. Both her parents are very old and work as daily wage laborers to afford basic expenses. Left with no other choice, her elder brother started working in Kerala as a manual worker and earns very little. Pinky has travelled to faraway places and cities in search of work. But the remuneration that she received was very low compared to the services she rendered. 6 years ago, she first migrated to Kerala and worked as a domestic worker. There she earned a total of Rs 4000/- per annum, which was not sufficient to run her family. Later, she migrated to Goa for a year and then to Mumbai for a total of 3 years. She became restless and hopeless, migrating and searching for a job where she could get at least a minimal wage and cater to her nominal expenses. This period of apprehension and misery was gone after she was offered to work as a domestic help in Secunderabad, Hyderabad. But one thing that always concerned her was the precise amount of money that she didn't actually receive. She was totally unaware of the fact that the money sent to her was through a third party. In the circumstances, she could not even gather the courage to ask the amount for fear of losing her job. As she used to send half of her wages to her needy family, the feeling of being anxious left her very petrified. A few days later, when she visited her village on leave for 2-3 days, she came across the pre-departure training program of Aaina. There she met some aaina staff who told her about the pre-requisites for safe migration: registration details, knowing the owner's identity (name, age, place), and a brief knowledge about the place/city to which she is migrating. The fruitful part in this study that aaina staffs witnessed was that her family now was economically sound and independent. Her family expenses were all covered and debts were repaid. Pinky's enormous and continuous hard work really did pay off.

#### *Case Study 4: Deception by Placement Agents*

Alongside this information drive, local SEWA units were created with regular meetings which allowed local issues to be taken up by workers who began to actively advocate for their rights. This was facilitated by local leaders (agewans, all women) who, supported by the organizers, began to lead collective actions to tackle members' issues. This was highly effective, with



workers able to get government benefits, NREGS<sup>3</sup> work, payments of dues from employers, justice for domestic violence, and even register cases of cheating by placement agents after migration. These local leaders also participated in district-level meetings, and 10 leaders from each district attended the first state-level meeting of SEWA Orissa on 11th-12th December 2015. The purpose of this meeting was to introduce these members the opportunity to meet leaders from other districts so they could share problems and gain solidarity. It was highly successful, and included a time where: each of the district leaders presented the key issues their members face. Subsequently members worked together to articulate their demands and present these to local government officials. They also saw an animated TV clip about domestic workers' issues prepared by Aaina, and a puppet show on migration that was developed as part of the educational programme. By May 2016, these successes had been built on and the strength of the Orissa union had grown to the point where a constitution was made and bye-laws written so that it could be registered with the Orissa government as a local union during the second phase of the WIF programme. This unfortunately has not yet happened due to administrative hurdles as of 2020.

Hence, the tireless work of SEWA and its partners built up a strong union of domestic workers in Orissa over a mere 2.5 years where none had existed before, empowering domestic workers to collectively fight for their rights as workers and tackling trafficking through connecting migrants to SEWA at both source and destination, and improving awareness about safe migration practices and the dangers of placement agents.

The organizer from Sundargarh shared a wonderful story related to women from her district who migrated to work as domestic workers in Mumbai. During December, when the migrant workers returned for Christmas, she had told them about their rights as migrants and the meaning of joining a union. This led to six of them taking membership and then, also got their ID cards. A few months later she got a call from one of those workers who said her employer had abruptly told her one day that she need not come back to work. But the employer owed her three months of salary and did not make any sign of paying her. So the organizer told her to get the other worker friends and go back to the employer and tell her they are from a union and if she does not pay the salary dues they will complain to the police. So the three of them went and politely asked the employer for the salary. At that point the employer made a lot of complaints saying that the worker had stolen a number of things and hence was not going to pay her. At that point, all the three workers took out their union ID cards and told the employer they would go to the police if she did not pay. Immediately, the employer went inside and returned with Rs.30000, the wages for the three months.

### Capacity Building of Trade Union Leaders to Organise & Represent Migrant Workers

Absolutely fundamental to SEWA's mission was the need for well-trained, enthusiastic trade union leaders who understood the plight of migrant domestic workers and had the knowledge and leadership skills to organise and represent them. SEWA developed long-term leadership for this campaign at two key levels: trade union organisers who led state-level units, and *agewans* (worker leaders) who took a leading role in local union units. These leaders were

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3 National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme



trained extensively through input sessions, both at the state and national level, and all were given an organisers' information booklet with a thorough explanation of: SEWA's structure and its history of working with domestic workers, how leaders can organise and empower workers, the common issues faced by migrant domestic workers, the strategies leaders should use to tackle these issues and the contents of Convention 189. The input training sessions covered a variety of wider topics, including: understanding the informal sector, women's work in a gendered society, trafficking and forced labour, organising strategies, and why women migrate in different areas. This was really important, not only in ensuring local leaders were best informed to help migrant domestic workers, but also in making sure leaders understood the wider national and international issues affecting domestic workers in their state, not just the local issues they heard about on a day-to-day basis. This training was very successful, with 18 organisers and around 50 agewans emerging who were excellent leaders and could articulate the issues and demands of migrant domestic workers very well, whilst having a strong understanding of the local, district, state and national structure of the SEWA union and campaign. In particular, strong agewans have been able to: assist workers in getting their entitlements from employers, make effective police complaints, speak to large groups of people and answer questions at public meetings, and register cases of domestic violence (2 in Katihar, Bihar, 1 in Munger, Bihar, and 2 in Delhi). One agewan even helped rescue an adolescent trapped in a trafficking chain and notify the state's anti-trafficking cell who traced those responsible, whilst another brought attention to a case of child rape and, with the union organiser's assistance, mobilised workers to ensure the rapist was booked and subsequently sentenced to 5 years' imprisonment: a rare instance of justice when so many other rape cases take years before prosecution. In Bihar, trade committees led by agewans were able to install over 200 electricity meters in domestic workers' homes so that they were no longer exploited by tekadars, and also pushed local authorities to get toilets and water pumps installed in Katihar.

SEWA has faced significant hurdles in training organisers and leaders. This type of work requires a long-term time commitment as organisers are nurtured and trained to think strategically over many months – no easy thing to arrange when organisers are so busy and at great distances. Furthermore, while many organisers made impressive progress, poor reading abilities for some remained a consistent disadvantage to long-term, sustained personal growth. In addition, finding leaders who were also returned migrants proved difficult, with just 10 of the target 45 trained by June 2016; this is therefore a target which is being carried forward into the second phase of the WIF programme.

SEWA also undertook one programme in Villupuram with the National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM). Young women migrated to Kerala for domestic work from this of Tamil Nadu. Although it was initially difficult to gain access to the homes of workers who had migrated, SEWA proceeded strategically and, through regular visits, managed to get mothers of workers and some returned migrants together to give them information about decent work conditions and labour rights. Unfortunately, the NDWM did not proceed to organise these workers, and SEWA did not intend to build a SEWA union in Tamil Nadu as there were several unions of domestic workers already; therefore, unfortunately this work was not sustained into the future.





## Upskilling Women Domestic Workers

The next step in organising domestic workers into unions and building these unions through outreach and leadership training was to use this base to offer skill training to improve wages, help workers organise collectively for their rights, and advocate for greater awareness of migrant domestic workers' issues and better institutional and legal mechanisms to support them. For an insight into the SEWA training programme, examples of national-level and state-level input sessions are outlined here.

### National Training for Domestic Workers

On the 26th-28th September 2016, organisers and agewans from across India met together in the SEWA Training Centre, Manipur, Ahmedabad for the purposes of building the participants' personal skills and confidence, and training them to plan SEWA's local activities effectively and strategically. To understand the importance of careful, detailed, and organised planning, participants were introduced to the key elements of planning and then asked to produce plans for celebrating International Domestic Workers' Day, struggling for minimum wages, and expanding SEWA's work in organising domestic workers. This was unsuccessful initially, as workers didn't take on board the necessity of attention to detail when planning; however, the exercise was repeated on the last day with much more success, and one worker remarked 'we did not realize that there was so much to foresee when organizing a programme!'.

After several confidence-boosting activities encouraging collaboration and discussion, the workers then moved on to discuss the nature of the activities and strategies they should employ as leaders to organise domestic workers. They put these lessons into practice through developing strategies in groups for five different activities: organising Mohalla meetings, canvassing for new members, helping workers to access their rights, ensuring members take advantage of government schemes which apply to them, and building relationships with employers. Whilst they ran out of time to go into these strategies deeply, the key lesson of how much time, planning and attention to detail is required to organise an union effectively was learnt by all.

To finish, each participant described their plans when they returned home now they have learned how to organise workers effectively, and it was decided that the participants would each organise feedback sessions for other aagewans in their areas before the end of the year so that this training could be distributed to SEWA members more widely.

*Figure 1: National Training for Domestic Workers*

SEWA's approach to skill training firstly consisted of building up collectives of skilled domestic workers in order to professionalise domestic work and improve collective bargaining achieving greater respect and increased wages. SEWA successfully trained trainers in skilled domestic work such as care for the elderly or sick; these trainers then taught these skills to collectives of domestic workers in Kerala initially, followed by Delhi and Patna, Bihar. Whilst this programme was very successful in Patna where over 100 workers were trained and over 50 of these gained work through their collective in the first year, in Calicut progress was slower.



In Delhi it did not take off at all. This was mainly an issue of domestic workers being unwilling to change their style of working. Whilst they would receive higher wages working in one home for 8 hours a day, they preferred to work in several homes for lower hourly wages as they did not have to deal with employers for longer periods. Also there was a great demand for live-in workers but women were not willing for this unless they were migrants. Nevertheless, for those who did go through the training and gain work through the collectives, an increased professionalism was noted which translated for all into increased wages.

### Example of State-Level Input Session in Tamil Nadu

A training was conducted for 43 leaders from across 20 districts of Tamil Nadu on 25th and 26th May 2016. The training was given by Mrs Anthonyammai and Mr Arul. In a brief introductory activity the leaders affirmed their unity and their strong desire to be leaders. The training covered several key topics like leadership skills, safe migration, the challenges domestic workers often face, and how leaders should intervene to help. The training also reaffirmed that migration within India is a right for Indian citizens and the leaders were taught how migrants must be well-informed to avoid placement agents who may mislead, exploit or harass them.

Leaders were informed what safe migration entails: migrants and their family knowing the name, address, and contact number of their employer and placement agent before migrating; migrants agreeing the nature of work, hours, breaks, wages and leave allowances with their employer before leaving; migrants keeping their identity card and documents with them in case of any problems; and migrants knowing where they can reach out to for any kind of support (the local SEWA union, NGOs or the police) if they face any issues. The leaders were given these training because they would then take this information to the community and the people they can reach out to are made aware and educated about safe migration practises. The leaders even began to form a database of the migrants who returned and who may need support or would want to participate in future training.

*Figure 2: Example of State-level Input Session in Tamil Nadu*

Along with training in organisation building for domestic work, SEWA also organised skill training in food processing (particularly of jackfruit, mango, pickles and dhal) and local sustainable crafts (such as leaf plates and mats) in Kerala and Orissa. These training equipped rural women to build their own livelihoods locally, which prevented distress migration.

As there is an important migration corridor between Kerala and Orissa, this was also a means of introducing the workers of each state to each other in order to build up organisational links. Learning to build a production enterprise was a challenge, with SEWA organisers and members needing to learn much about running a business (including making a business plan, ensuring there was a market for the product, sustaining the workers' group, sourcing raw materials, and finding good locations to sell the products). This upskilling was developed with a view of workers having employment for at least 300 days of every year: work in agriculture for 90 days, NREGS work for another 100 days, and some supplementary employment from seasonal food processing work or from forest produce and animal husbandry. Overall, these



activities were very successful in both diversifying domestic workers' skillset and professionalising domestic work.

### Collaboration with Migrant Forum India (MFI) and Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW) – Strengthening Advocacy and Services Related to Overseas

#### Migration

SEWA Kerala has been advocating for the rights of cross-border migrant domestic workers for their safe migration and decent work throughout the Work in Freedom programme. This initially involved identifying returned migrants and then organising them. Various methods were used to get the attention of the migrant workers and educate them. Some of them were: holding public events and throwing some light to these issues, wall-writings and posters in places where more and more people could see them, conversations with panchayats and employers to get them involved. The fact that returned migrants became more organised put pressure on NORKA (Non-Resident Keralite Affairs) who, by the end of Phase 1, started to reach out to these workers; however, issues concerning white collar workers and nurses remained their priority. NORKA's collaboration with domestic workers and SEWA Kerala has been highly valuable moving forwards and has particularly grown through Phase 2 of the WIF programme.

During the initial phase, there was limited collective action between MFA, GAATW, IDWF and SEWA. While the MFA (Migrant Forum Asia) and GAATW worked independently, SEWA and IDWF collaborated closely, this partnership is explored in detail in chapter 3. SEWA and GAATW also did relate to each other through joint meetings, and towards the end of the first phase worked closely together in Orissa. They organised joint meetings on migration and attempted to develop a Platform on Migration in Orissa which unfortunately did not really take off. Despite these hurdles, SEWA was still highly effective in giving a voice to cross-border migrant domestic workers, reducing stigma surrounding them and enhancing the services available to them to support safe migration practices. SEWA profited from the experience of GAATW in understanding trafficking issues and its politics when its members were invited to a couple of its international sessions. This helped SEWA interact meaningfully in India when the trafficking bill was being amended. These interactions on these larger platforms did enrich SEWA's understanding and work in this field.



## International Migrant Workers' Day : 18<sup>th</sup> December, 2018, Kerala

The knowledge and information about safe migration and leadership skills was utilized and passed on to migrant workers through mass celebrations such as International Migrant Workers' Day. 18th December is observed as International Migrant Workers' Day to highlight the contributions made by millions of migrants. In 2018 on the International Migrant Workers' day, SEWA Union and Kerala Migrant Workers' Union AITUC jointly organised a rally and public meeting of migrant workers to explore the issues of migrants in Kerala. The meeting was chaired by Ad. Binu Bose (Secretary, Kerala Migrant Workers' Union) and inaugurated by Mr. K P Rajendran, (General Secretary, AITUC). It was attended by Mr. Bichu Balan (Deputy Labour Commissioner), other trade union leaders and migrant workers. In his inaugural address, Mr Rajendran stated that the Labour Department of Kerala should ensure minimum wages and better working conditions for migrant workers. Ms. Sonia George, Secretary SEWA Union then highlighted the issues of female migrant workers, both internally and across borders. She stressed that it is very difficult to identify female migrant workers, especially those working in the domestic work sector who are the most vulnerable and have limited access to support. Therefore, the meeting concluded that there should be mechanisms to address the different issues of these workers. There was then a rally comprised of around 150 workers who marched from Ernakalum Boat Jetty to KSEB Hall. It was a powerful event where migrants in this area came together for the first time to celebrate their work and advocate for their rights internationally.

*Figure 3: International Migrant Workers' Day (18th December 2018, Kerala)*

### Towards the National Legislation on Domestic Workers

SEWA advocated for a comprehensive national legislation protecting the rights of domestic workers throughout the ILO WIF programme. The ILO did provide a platform to raise the issues of domestic workers at the level of the labour front in India. Even though the issues of domestic workers were of less importance for the central trade union, they engaged in the conversations. Unfortunately and disappointingly the Indian government as of 2020 hasn't shown any ray of hope to implement the national policy for domestic workers. The voices of the domestic workers are growing stronger and larger in number with more and more smaller unions growing all over the country. The National Platform for Domestic Workers continues to encourage a number of unions to come together and demand for the national policy. These voices get stronger day by day with the hope of a legal change by the continuous pressure.

### Tackling Issues of Migration

Educating domestic workers about their rights and providing them the support they need was not enough for an institutional action against trafficking. It was important to engage with local domestic workers' organisations, women's organisations and local politicians and officials in the conversation pushing for institutional action against trafficking. It was only possible through a combination of efforts around spreading awareness, discussion, and public events. The higher rate of turnover of department officials is a major challenge as the consistency in building strategies dampens in assisting the process. The members at the grassroot level like



ward members, anganwadi workers, and ICDS supervisors have grown to understand the subject of domestic work as work and are aware about the international convention supporting their rights.

### Educating Domestic Workers and their Organizations on their Rights as Migrants and the Dangers of Trafficking

Along with various input sessions and building the capacity of the leaders, it was important to educate them about the right to migrate within India, the dangers of trafficking, understanding the aspects of forced labour, aspects of safe migration, and most importantly, the need for implementation of C189. SEWA educated the migrant domestic workers about the above-mentioned concepts through public meetings and making them informed by distributing them booklets with all the information they need. The major challenge faced here was identifying the location of migrant domestic workers and the ability of local organizers to understand and navigate through the dimension in the initial years.

#### Indicators of Forced Labour

Since domestic work is generally deemed lowly, domestic workers also do not react to abuse. Hence, the following should be kept in mind.

- *Abuse of Vulnerability* - as a woman, from a backward community, being poor and in need
- *Deception* - lack of awareness about the world outside, faith in people who seem helpful, often a local person or even a family member
- *Restriction of Movement* - kept indoors, identity papers in hands of employer
- *Isolation* - not allowed to use a phone
- *Physical and Sexual Abuse* - of all kinds, inappropriate touch and language
- *Intimidation* - threat of losing the job
- *Withholding Wages* - in promise that it will be given when leaving work
- *Debt Bondage* - work without wages as a means to repay debts even of parents

Whilst in cities this was very effective in making domestic workers more aware of their rights, in the rural districts of Sundargarh, Gajapathy and Khandamal in Orissa, Quilon, Cochin, Trivandrum and Mallapuram in Kerala, and Villipuram in Tamil Nadu progress took longer initially as families were reluctant to admit young women were migrating; however, the atmosphere soon thawed and more open conversations were had over time. By March 2015, over 11,000 workers in Orissa and 5,500 workers in Villipuram had been given information by SEWA regarding safe migration and domestic workers rights. There is no doubt that this work was highly valuable. In particular, once taught about the indicators of forced labour (listed below), SEWA domestic worker members organised locally against these practices, collectively approaching employers on complaints received and seeking justice. One SEWA member, after learning about forced labour, found this deeply emotional and stated: 'if I had known I had the right to be free, I would not have been in bondage for my whole youth'. This shows just how important SEWA's awareness-raising work has been.



## Case Study 5 : Forced Labour

An old worker - Alkaben (aged 61 Years) was working as a full time Domestic Worker in Vasundhara Enclave, Delhi for the last 2 years. She had migrated to Delhi from West Bengal. The employer tortured her physically and mentally and did not allow her outside of the home. Sometimes she had to go out when she had to purchase some household things. One day Ultra ben (Aagewan) interacted with her and she informed her that she wanted to go back to her home in West Bengal, but the employer had prevented her. She also informed that the employer had not given wages for the last 7 months. Ultra ben shared all the details with SEWA team members during the training session. The organizer suggested that Uttraben first talk to the employer to see if she would let her leave which she did with two other SEWA members. The employer was scared and denied that she had held back wages. After a lot of conversation between the employer and Ultra ben, and demanding Alka ben's rights, finally, she agreed to let the domestic worker leave, and also gave her pending wages. Ultra ben helped her book the ticket for her home in West Bengal and helped her return home.

### *Case Study 5: Forced Labour*

## Sensitising Panchayats, Labour Officials and other Local Officials on the issues of Migration and Trafficking

SEWA worked with local panchayats to advocate for domestic workers rights and gain their support in tackling domestic workers' issues. This was an uphill battle in some areas (particularly in West Bengal and Kerala) as some local leaders preferred to push these issues under the carpet since they were involved in or close to the placement agent nexus themselves. However, through SEWA's education of local leaders about safe migration, trafficking and the rights of domestic workers, some local leaders expressed a greater feeling of responsibility towards domestic workers, and have helped SEWA gain membership in regions where other unions are hostile to SEWA's presence. Nevertheless, other local officials remain blatantly dismissive which is a barrier to further progress. Along with involving the panchayat, local authorities have also been educated through public events, such as the Delhi public hearing of domestic workers described in the introduction, and celebrations of International Domestic Workers' Day and International Migrant Workers Day (described in more detail in Chapter 5).



## Working Intensively in Ganjam, Odisha and Assessing Impact

A need for a baseline study was identified by the ILO during the initial phase of the Work in Freedom Programme in India. A baseline study becomes an important part of any development intervention because that becomes the basis of any progress made during the programme. SEWA conducted a baseline study in collaboration with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in Ganjam District, Odisha. SEWA took the opportunity to learn and understand the methodology ILO used to achieve the objectives. SEWA then partnered with Aaina, a local partner organisation of NAWO and now of SEWA too, as Aaina had some familiarity with the geography and demography of Ganjam district.

50 villages in Bhanjanagar and Surada blocks were identified as locations with high numbers of potential migrants. No similar interventions took place before in these villages. The London School of Hygiene and Tropical medicine developed a strategy to empower and reach out to the 15 identified villages. Other methods of outreach too were developed to connect with the community members and empower them with the information and knowledge about safe migration practices. One of the tools was developing audio-visual materials in local language and dialect to reach the audience better. Meantime Aaina worked towards building a team of staff, peer educators, and community volunteers who would be working together towards achieving the predetermined goals.

Whilst the focus of the ILO intervention was to prevent the trafficking of female workers (especially domestic workers) and to enable safe and informed migration, SEWA's had an added focus of namely, to help women organise and unionise. Hence, this intervention had 5 key objectives:

- Educating the women and the community at large about the value of women's work and their economic contribution to the household and the community. This would be the first step in building dignity of domestic work just as any other work.
- Empowering women by reassuring to them that migration is a right, further enabling them to make informed decisions, and conducting awareness to migrate through safe migration channels
- Helping the women workers to organise and form unions to make themselves visible and have collective voice and strength.
- Facilitating creation of institutional mechanisms to facilitate decent work and safe migration for work for women workers.
- Monitoring and documenting the interventions made under the project.

### Educating the Community to Identify Safe Channels of Migration

To plan the modalities of any intervention, it was important to understand the overall scenario of the identified villages, the socio-economic challenges the villagers especially women domestic workers face, and identifying vulnerable populations who could be the potential migrants. The identification process was made possible through various tools which support



the building of understanding of rural reality. Tools like active and meaningful community participation, which also included resource mapping, social mapping, focus group discussions, and individual discussions through household visits were used. The team engaging in the assessment activities at the grassroots level were first given intensive training by Aaina. In these training the team learnt about the seven roles of a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) team, the importance of building a rapport with the community leader and organisation beforehand, ways to facilitate and moderate the PRA exercise with large groups of people. They were also given the training for various soft skills like being honest with the community members, open, respectful and sensitive about various discussions with the community members.

Following is a gist of the PRA event that happened in the identified villages.

- A team of volunteers and Aaina staff arrive at the village and have an introductory meeting in a community space.
- The team members are divided into groups and each group starts discussions with the village residents (both adults, adolescents and children) to build rapport and explain the aim of the visit.
- As per the advice of the eldest village members, all the members and volunteers gather in a common place and discuss the objective of the exercise and how data can be collected to identify vulnerable families in the village and map the social status of the households.
- The community members physically present initiate the process and draw the connecting road to the village. The children, youth and adult members involved then start drawing the houses of the village one by one, starting from a well-known place. Typically, some confusion arises regarding the category of the households, so volunteers step in to mediate this.
- After the base map is complete, the women who are participating put different seeds and marbles in each house to represent the male/female and boy/girl population, which is then corrected by all.
- Some of the volunteer staff then begin identifying the vulnerable families in the village, and the parameters for a family to meet this. Data is collected regarding the facilities and schemes used by each vulnerable family. Some staff members also visit the village to collect further village information data through focus group discussion.
- After a break, all the members then collect data regarding the main occupation of the village and the number of livestock.
- Finally, all the community comes together again to visually represent the vulnerable families on the social map, and individuals share why they belong in that group. The facilities and schemes used by each family are also mapped onto this.
- The findings of the PRA are then shared with the community members and recorded, and all participants are thanked for their time and efforts.





## Script of Puppet Show : Women's Self Respect

### Scene 1:

All the puppets sing a welcome song explaining why they have come to the village and how they will show the public the importance of domestic work.

### Scene 2:

This scene shows a rich family who hire a female domestic worker called Manasi and exploit her 24 hours a day. Her salary is not given on time, she is never given a holiday, and all she has to eat is dry roti. When she gets ill, she is not given the basic medicine she needs, and she is always scolded for everything. Manasi is very upset; she blames her fate and feels unable to do anything about it.

### Scene 3:

In Manasi's village, some men and women from the community discuss the fact that there has been a poor harvest this year; they are worried about how they will survive and ensure there is enough food for their family and children. There is not work in the village currently, and even if it was available it would be highly stigmatised work where they would get no respect. Therefore, they decided to move to another town after two contractors persuade them with promises of plenty of work, money and respect. The scene finishes with a song as they leave the village which describes how they have left due to pressure, not by their own will.

### Scene 4:

The families have arrived in a very big town with big companies, large buildings everywhere, and so many people arriving in search of work. There are some educated people who are in need of domestic workers to look after their family. However, the reality of the domestic work is not as promised: most of the salary is taken by the mediator, the domestic workers are not treated properly, and the house owner takes away their voter IDs, cell phones and adhar cards. Manasi is again in distress and thinking about what she can do.

### Scene 5:

Back in the village in Ganjam, everybody is very worried about this situation. The volunteers from Aaina reach the village and try to sensitize the public and potential migrant workers about safe migration. They must know: the details of where they will go; the name, address and phone number of who they are going with; the wages they will get; and the type of work, hours, leave and facilities available to them. They must also give their information to the local Sarapanch, block officials and police station, and they must bring their proof of identity (voter card and adhar card).

### Scene 6:

All the women join together to discuss the value of their work. They describe how domestic work is work and their contribution should be respected because their earning is adding to not only the family income, but also the per capita income of India as a whole. The show finishes with a song to remind the audience of the key things they need to remember in order to migrate safely.

Figure 4: Script of Puppet Show

This baseline information was then used to make an intervention plan for each village tailored to their particular population and needs. For instance, Gaudagotha, Jagamohan, Gajarkumpa and Valiapada villages all had high numbers of young widows, so their particular intervention plan included creating a group of these widows so they could discuss their issues, options for income generation and how to tackle the problem of addiction to a



local alcohol brewed from poor-quality local ingredients which was responsible for many of their husbands' deaths. Hence, here SEWA's interventions were highly holistic, supporting women in improving their financial situation, access to resources, employment options, and physical and emotional wellbeing. The idea behind this was to improve women's lives in their villages, thus reducing their vulnerability and susceptibility to distress migration. Furthermore, in all villages, door-to-door information was given to potential migrant households (identified from the social mapping) regarding safe migration and the risks of forced labour and trafficking. Overall, these intensive interventions by peer educators and community volunteers were highly effective; however, SEWA did have a few hurdles to overcome. Firstly, many of the villages had few vulnerable families in which women expressed an intention to migrate, contrary to the ILO's expectations; however, the interventions here were simply adapted to focus on issues of poverty and deprivation, so the results were still highly valuable. Similarly, initially some of the door-to-door information was overly general, with the advice given not tailored to individuals' needs; however, over time the peer educators and community volunteers received more input sessions regarding the various legislations and programmes for marginalised groups, so these interactions gradually became more meaningful and specific.



Figure 5: Community Interventions and Puppet Shows

## Reducing Distress Migration

An important approach identified by SEWA was linked to reducing distress migration in rural areas by linking families to Government schemes and programmes. Through various other series of conversations with the villagers other challenges like children, especially young girls dropping out of school were identified. These families were supported to put their children back to school. The widows and old age women in the villages were documented and were linked with various government programmes like public food distribution scheme (ration card). Initially the process took a long time for the team to link the members with the schemes, as time passed, the team were given the training of the processes, they even self learnt the



process and with the support of SEWA the local groups and teams were able to reach out to more and more people and link them with various social security schemes launched by the government. The government when launched such programmes did spread awareness about the social security schemes, but they couldn't reach the marginalized communities and the people living in remote areas. The team developed through the intervention tried to fill the gap in the hope of reducing distress migration.

### Safe Migration

The campaigns to reduce distress migration were also coupled with intensive pre-departure programmes which informed potential migrants about how to migrate safely. In order to build this programme, firstly the modules were developed. The National Coordinator prepared 20 focussed sessions amounting to 11 hours of inputs which covered the main messages of the programme. These modules were delivered to both the Ganjam team and NAWO staff on the 2nd-3rd September 2015, and included inputs from experts on financial literacy, healthcare and the use of mobile phones alongside expertise from SEWA, the ILO Coordinator and Aaina regarding domestic workers' rights and safe migration. Feedback from staff on these sessions revealed that the issue of forced labour was the very new and informative to them, whilst the lessons on financial literacy were of the greatest personal relevance since it was through this programme that all the field workers not only opened bank accounts but also helped women to do so thereby linking their accounts to local government schemes – an excellent way for them to practice what they preached to the community. Subsequently the ILO Coordinator provided an input to the 10 selected trainers coordinating the pre-departure sessions and explained how the sessions could be organised so as to be as effective, participatory and demonstrative as possible. She also highlighted the importance of good record-keeping, with reports of how government departments offer support, what each partner brings to the programme and case studies of the programme's impacts for its participants. Following this larger training programme, the 10 training coordinators came together for a 2-day module development workshop with the SEWA Coordinator, where they split into groups and planned how each module would be communicated and what tools would be used, such as posters, street plays, flipcharts and songs. On the second day, two local artists specialising in drama and fine art helped further professionalise these sessions by guiding the training team on their theme-based songs and posters. After this training, a mock session was conducted in the project office on 20th November 2015 where they got further feedback and suggestions for improvement. By this time the team was confident and very conversant on migration issues which they articulated with clarity.

Once the modules had been prepared and the trainers trained, they then conducted the pre-departure orientations for potential migrants. This occurred over the holiday season when many migrants return home. Over the week from 23rd November 2015 to 5th December 2015, 333 potential migrant workers participated in sessions over 7 training programmes, each lasting 2 days with 10 sessions a day. They were a very important tool for these workers who emerged with a much stronger knowledge about safe migration and the dangers of trafficking, forced labour and harassment. The one key limitation to these programmes was that the results of the social mapping were not ready before the sessions were run, meaning that around 30% of the participants had little intention of migrating in the first place, so the



programme was not as targeted as it could have been. However, this also had its own advantages as the programme reached a broader range of groups, meaning some male migrants became educated about safe migration too. Furthermore, SEWA staff were able to follow up on the particular concerns of specific areas, such as AIDS and trafficking for marriage, after the social mapping was complete, so the project became contextualised once that information was available.

However, to the great surprise of SEWA staff, in August 2016 it was brought to their attention that some young girls aged between 14 and 18 in the intervention areas had been migrating secretly to other states with brokers. This brought a great period of reflection amongst the team who were saddened that at a time when so much intensive pre-departure education had been extended, still some young girls were migrating without proper protection. Detailed questions were asked to the families so SEWA could better understand how the brokers were working, and renewed efforts were made to particularly reach out to adolescent groups so that young girls would also be informed about safe migration and engaged in the programme.

### Organising and Forming Unions

This intensive intervention helped the workers to start building unions locally which would allow them to collectively organize themselves and advocate for their rights. This was made possible with training and educational awareness about the value of women's work, domestic workers' rights and safe migration practices. The programme being short term, initially the focus was on three panchayats in Bhanjanagar. Unionising work requires a good amount of following up and constant handholding of the team on the grassroots level. SEWA didn't want to leave anything half way and so didn't initiate the efforts to create a union initially. It was only after some of the team members showed interest in creating a union the talks of creating a union began. Along with unionising it was decided to even work towards developing alternative areas of livelihood generation, as it would play a major role in reducing distress migration.

In order to initiate unionising efforts, a select group of four peer educators and volunteers were firstly trained through two two-day sessions in collective action and building a union of members. The training took place in May 2016 and by August it was decided that a small team could be extended for the next year (beyond the programme deadline of December), consisting of one worker to sustain the union, one to follow up on livelihood alternatives and skill development, and one to take charge of marketing the goods produced by the workers. As of August 2016, these efforts had coalesced into 9 workers groups led by local leaders each containing around 20-25 female workers. These groups had meetings, began to learn more about union activities, and even in these early stages began to see the success of working collectively. One village managed to raise the agricultural wages from Rs.100 to Rs.130 because they collectively decided not to work for less. Another group managed to get a common tube well as there was no drinking water, and in one remote village two normally vying caste groups managed to stand together and get a common road leading to the area. After seeing these successes, it was then decided to extend unionisation to Surada too, as the organisers felt this was the only way to build and sustain collective activity and to counter the trafficking of women by agents since Surada was a hotspot for out-migration.



## Case Study 6 : Forced Labour

Jhani, a woman in her early 20s, belonged to a very poor family from Surada block in Ganjam, Odisha. Her family background was very distressing; she had two brothers who married and cut ties with her and their family. Her father died due to a severe heart attack. Before SEWA/Aaina's intervention, Jhani was sole responsible for her family after her father departed, and her mother was bed-ridden after several years of serious illness. In March 2013, Jhani and a friend went to Goa in search of suitable work. She planned to earn some money and save it for her mother's medical expenses. She finally got a reasonable job where she earned Rs3,500 monthly. One day she pleaded to take some leave. She was allowed and the owner gave her a cheque of Rs 81,000 for the services provided by her. She was very happy and glad as she thanked him. However, she also faced some considerable obstacles: she was not allowed to take any casual leave, which made her restless and aggressive so she often quarrelled with the houseowner, and wages were never paid on time. During Aaina's intervention, Jhani was called upon by village panchayat officials and introduced to all aaina staff members at a meeting. During the pre-departure training, she was provided with some advice regarding opening of a new bank account, awareness regarding safe migration and the relevant necessities before and after migration. When asked about her living style at her workplace, she replied with much pleasure: "I was never welcomed as a helper, but the family used to treat me as one of their members" of which she was really glad. Though she didn't fall into the dreadful consequences of migration, she conveyed her heartiest thanks to all the aaina staff who gave her advice. Recently, she visited deposited Rs50,000 as a fixed deposit in a bank and kept Rs20,000 for her mother's treatment. The village folks demanded her to complete her schooling, but this she completely denied.

### *Case Study 6: Forced Labour*

#### Creating Institutional Mechanism

Creating some institutional mechanisms to support decent work and safe migration for female workers was one of the key goals of SEWA through this intervention. It was important to make sure that the progress was sustainable even after the intervention was over. This was achieved through a four- point strategy: (1) educating local government institutions, personnel and civil society organisations about the important contribution of women workers, their right to migrate and the risks of labour trafficking; (2) educating PRI members and community leaders and workers about relevant labour laws; (3) building local institutional mechanisms which promote safe migration; and (4) delivering mid-term feedback to authorities and enlisting their commitment towards developing safe migration channels.



## Module list and Methods for the Pre-departure Programme:

Module	Content	Method
1	Introduction to Orientation	Warming up with introductions, a song and group discussion
2	I, as a woman, am a contributor to society both socially and economically	An interactive session discussing participants' contributions to society
3	As a woman in the family and in the community, do I have rights?	Role play and Song
4	What does it mean to be a worker, and a domestic worker? Do I have rights?	Interactive Session
5	As a domestic worker, what are my rights and responsibilities?	Interactive session and small group discussion
6	What does it mean to be a migrant worker?	Interactive session
7	Who is taking you?	Role play of being cheated by an agent, and discussion
8	You need to know why you are going and what you want to gain	Interactive session
9	You need to prepare yourself for migration	Interactive session
10	Do you need money? If yes, how do you secure it?	Interactive session
11	Where are you going?	Interactive session
12	What will happen in the new place?	Discussion session
13	What kind of worker will you be there?	Discussion session
14	What should you know from the employer before you start working?	Role play
15	What problems could you face	Three groups discuss posters
16	Different traps you can fall into	Recap plus interactive discussion
17	What will you do if you are in a crisis?	Poster with important telephone numbers
18	Do you know how to use a phone?	Three different phones with a poster explaining their tools
19	Have you registered in the panchayat? Have you joined the union?	Interactive session
20	Take care of yourself and your health	Sharing health issues and given inputs on general and sexual health

Right from the start of this intervention, the programme was launched through two seminar events in Bhanjanagar and Surada blocks in July 2015 in the Block Development Officers (BDO) premises. Each event had over 70 participants from the local community, including migrant workers, community leaders, Sarapanchs, ward members, Anganwadi workers,



media, other local NGO members, Block officials and other panchayat representatives and chaired by the BDO. At these events, Aaina and SEWA gave an outline of the programme, the issues it tackles and its key mission of female empowerment through participation in workers' organisations. This put upfront the issues of migration – an issue which these local bodies had earlier not tackled. At the end of each seminar, block-level forums were created which subsequently functioned as local migration monitoring units.

Particular efforts were then made to engage with local NGOs and service providers. On the 14th-15th February 2016, once the social mapping had been completed and the project was in full swing, SEWA ran two one-day NGO forums in Bhanjanagar and Surada, each with around 50 participants. They featured NGOs from a range of sectors: youth clubs, Self Help Groups, spiritual groups, rural development NGOs, AIDS NGOs, water and sanitation NGOs,

#### **Case Study 7: Abuse, Underpay and Discrimination**

My name is Mehrunisha and I am 55 years old. I am from Purniya, Bihar. I am an illiterate woman and never went to school. After my marriage, I was not happy as my husband used abusive language with me and used to beat me up very badly. My family was very poor and we did not have any land or our own or even our own house. I could only manage food once in a day after a lot of struggle in my hometown. One day my husband decided to go to Delhi alone. After four years I joined him in Delhi. When I reached Delhi, I was surprised to know that my husband had married another woman. I felt lonely and was again shocked when my husband informed me that he called me to Delhi because I had to earn money for the family. One day he left me in a bungalow (Kothi) where I started to work as domestic worker. My husband came occasionally to meet me. After some time, I left the bungalow work because my employer tortured me. I then started working in four houses as a domestic worker and earned Rs. 3000 in a month. I lived alone in a rented house and paid Rs. 2000 for rent every month. My salary was very low for all the work I did and it was not increased. I could not take even a single leave because the employer used to deduct my salary. The employer used abusive language and sometimes insulted me. My physical condition also deteriorated. One day during working hours, I wanted to use the toilet. I cleaned this toilet on regular basis. But the employer scolded me and instructed me not to ask to use their toilet again, and to go outside instead. After this incident I used to go outside in the park but one day a woman saw me and complained to my employer. My employer scolded me and told me to leave the job. After that I tried hard to get another job in the same community but no one helped me or wanted to keep me for work. I could not understand. Now I have been a member of the SEWA trade union for the last 4 years. I got an identity card which helps me to maintain my identity as a domestic worker. I always carry my identity card when I go to work. After joining SEWA I feel proud of myself. I have attended lots of training programs which helps to increase my knowledge and confidence level. I am very thankful to SEWA for changing my life.

#### *Case Study 7: Abuse, Underpay and Discrimination*

and some large NGOs such as PREM, ARUNA, Adivasi Seva Samiti. The Ganjam programme coordinator outlined the findings of the PRA and initial village interactions, explaining that the main issues were the large number of widows, the lack of NREGA work, the large number of school dropouts, and the prevalence of local migration to neighbouring districts. Discussions were had about the reasons behind these issues, and plans were made for how the NGOs could cooperate with SEWA moving forwards so they all operated in a coordinated manner; an NGO alliance platform at the block level was created for this purpose.



To strengthen the vision and work of this platform, SEWA organised two one-day seminars in October 2016 on labour laws (such as the Interstate Migrant Workers Act, Unorganised Workers Act and Board, C189, and regulation for placement agencies). These were organised in a way that facilitated workers themselves to interact with the authorities and then campaign for them to introduce legal safeguards. It was also necessary to educate PRI members and community leaders about these labour laws, so that the local forum built up after the launch events was informed enough to effectively achieve local development goals and tackle migration issues. This occurred through an initiative with labour officers and local PRI<sup>4</sup> members on 18th-19th October 2016 where 30 SEWA members and the GP<sup>5</sup> coordinators from Ganjam, Khondmal and Gajapathy joined together to discuss and present their issues to these local officials. Subsequently, on the 24th October 2016, there was a formal input session for the PRI members where Aaina presented the resource mapping findings and summarised the successes and hurdles of the work so far, whilst Umi Daniel (who had worked for many years on the migration of brick kiln workers) explained local issues of migration and trafficking and how his organisation intervened. These activities helped keep labour officers and PRI members informed, whilst also ensuring wider collaboration on migration and workers' issues to maximise the intervention's impacts in the long term.

After this, the focus shifted to using these networks to build a local institutional framework which prevents trafficking and promotes safe migration. This was done firstly through organising local programmes for International Women's Day, International Domestic Workers' Day and International Migrant Workers' Day (see Chapter 5), which raised awareness of their issues and the need for collaborative action to make migration safer. Furthermore, drawing on Aaina's links with people with disabilities, by August 2016, 21 information centres staffed by disabled groups had begun to function, albeit with some at a higher level of activity than others. Initially these groups understood very quickly how to effectively intervene in migration issues, but it took longer to train them using input sessions to effectively reach out to give information about individuals' rights and entitlements from government schemes. However, overall, SEWA and Aaina's efforts were successful, as local people began to understand what the information hubs offered so they began regularly approaching them which was very encouraging.

The final stage of SEWA's efforts in creating institutional mechanisms to facilitate decent work and safe migration for female workers was to present their findings to the authorities and seek their commitment to improving the situation. This occurred on the 26th October 2016 when Ms. Sneha Mishra, Ms. Nalini Nayak, and Ms. Sonia George from Aaina and SEWA presented the programmes details, methodology, findings, and recommendations to Mr Sibanarayan Sahu (the District Labour Officer, Ganjam) and Mr Prashanna Kumar Pradhan (the Assistant Labour Officer, Kandhamal). Representatives of women workers from Ganjam also had the opportunity to present their issues with regard to labour and explain the underlying reasons for migration. Both the ALO and DLO listened carefully and congratulated SEWA and Aaina

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4 Panchayat Raj Institution – local government

5 Gram Panchayat – Basic unit of the local government





for organising such an extensive programme. They expressed their concerns about the vulnerability of migrants, and made a few suggestions for how this situation could be improved, including: workers joining the Odisha Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board (although this is not tailored to domestic workers' needs), NGOs registering as legal aid volunteers so they can tackle contractors who don't register with the Labour Department, workers reporting incidents in the workplace to the Department who will take action, and registering themselves if they decide to migrate so the Department is aware of them and can assist if needed. Unfortunately, the Collector of Ganjam could not attend this event due to official commitments; however, a memorandum compiled by SEWA regarding other social issues affecting domestic workers was passed on to him.



## Empowering Domestic Workers Through a Partnership with IDWF

Ever since the IDWF was formed in 2013, there has been a strong and productive partnership between SEWA and IDWF. SEWA organisers and members were introduced to the international network and added different insights and perspectives in organizing. This was possible only because of the partnership with IDWF. Since 2015, every year with the backing of Olof Palme Center and Break for the World, SEWA's efforts in empowering domestic workers in different states have been strengthened. The movement for unionising and organising the domestic workers spread across the country in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh.

Workers from India who participated in the Founding Congress of the IDWF in Montevideo, Uruguay and then in the Second Congress in Cape Town, South Africa were impressed to meet domestic workers from so many countries, all sharing the same experiences as themselves. This gave them an idea of the global extent of the problems and therefore the need to understand their issues in the larger system of labour exploitation.

Over the next two years, these projects focused on: training and education of domestic worker groups and leaders; organising to advocate for domestic workers' rights; recruiting domestic workers into the SEWA union; and national advocacy through the national platform. The training and education of domestic worker groups occurred through the formation and development of domestic worker trade committees in the union at the district and state level, where local domestic worker leaders learnt to handle local issues and made plans for collective action. This was particularly valuable in the Northern states where previously these issues had been taboo to discuss for fear of it adversely affecting domestic workers' jobs. Furthermore, these trade committees were a helpful mechanism to bring domestic workers' issues to the national SEWA union, and from there to get representation on the national labour front.

The success of these committees was supported through annual national trainings in Ahmedabad, and later Delhi, where roughly 70 domestic worker leaders and organisers came together, shared the issues and experiences of domestic workers in their districts (especially migrant domestic workers), made work plans for the coming year, and learnt about developing campaigns and existing legislation to further achieve their rights. Through these programmes, domestic workers in 10 states became members and worked as a union. Local advocacy was coupled at the national level by the continued organising of the National Platform of Domestic Workers. In 2015, these efforts particularly focused on providing critical comments on the government's national policy for domestic workers (which gave greater power to recruitment agencies), and encouraging the Central Trade Unions to take the issues of domestic workers more seriously.

From 2017 to 2019, the IDWF-OPC cooperation supported 15 affiliates (of which SEWA was one) across 7 countries in building up the IDWF's membership and furthering the social and



legal protection and advancement of the rights of its members. This programme proceeded through four key methods:

- Outreach and recruitment (2017), then strengthening leadership skills (2018-2019);
- Capacity Building;
- Interacting with stakeholders and lawmakers;

Tackling violence at the workplace of domestic workers.

### Case Study 8: Unfair Dismissal and Non Payment of Wages

My name is Deepa. I am currently working as a domestic worker in the Raghuvir Nagar area, Delhi. I have been staying with my family. I have a single room on rent and am paying Rs. 3000/- for the room and paying extra for the electricity and water bill. I am married and have 2 children and my husband is a rickshaw puller. I migrated to Delhi from U.P. I completed my primary education from U.P Govt. School. My family was very poor. I have a small piece of land in the village but it was difficult to make a living from it. Hence, I decided to move away from my village along with husband and my children to earn more money. We lived with my relative Bua Saas in the same room which was very small along with two more members. I did not know anyone else in Delhi. I started to work as a domestic worker in a single house then slowly I identified 3 more houses and worked there too every day. After a lot of struggle I did not get enough money. I did not get any leave during the whole month, and if I did take leave, my employer would deduct my salary. I faced lots of problem from one of the employers who was living in Taigore Garden, Delhi, who one day accused me of stealing her gold. I tried a lot to convince the employer that I had not done that, but the employer would not listen to anything. After that I left my job but the employer did not release my salary. I had worked for 2 years in that house. I visited her several times for my salary but every time she denied rudely. One day the employer slapped me and registered a complaint against me in the police station. It was a very disrespectful moment. I felt very angry and insulted. The police officer also didn't support me. He was very rude and used abusive language against me. Then one day I shared my story with SEWA didi (Sonia). Sonia didi talked to the police officer over phone. One day she visited in the police station along with me and met the S.H.O. After that, the police supported me and did a fair investigation. She told my employer that they cannot hold back my salary without proving anything and she registered a complaint against the employer in RWA. The RWA also supported me and instructed the employer to release my salary immediately, which she did. I felt very grateful for this but it was a great struggle. Now I am a member of the SEWA trade union. I have an identity card to work as a domestic worker, and I have gained lots of confidence and knowledge. Now I help other domestic workers to join SEWA UNION too. But we have to struggle hard for our rights and respect. I am very thankful to SEWA for supporting me.

#### *Case Study 8: Unfair Dismissal and Non Payment of Wages*

Continuing the work of previous years, outreach and recruitment occurred through expanding the areas of organising (particularly within new districts in Bihar and Kerala, and more intensely in Rajasthan and Lucknow), enhancing participation in meetings, building up trade committees where domestic workers could learn from each other's organising efforts, and celebrating International Domestic Workers' Day and International Migrant Workers' Day to raise public awareness of these groups' issues and build their sense of solidarity. Similarly, capacity building continued the work of previous years, with annual training each September



that built the leadership skills and confidence of women leaders, allowed them to compare

*Case Study 9: Exploitation by Placement Agents*

**Case Study 9: Exploitation by Placement Agents**

Three women from Trivandrum went to Dubai with the help of a relative who worked in Kuwait. He directed these women to a local person whom they did not know. This person charged them Rs 50,000 each to arrange their passports, tickets and visas. When they reached Dubai, they were met by another unknown person who took them to a house run by a Keralite woman in which there were several other workers. The local Arabs came there to recruit the women of their choice. The female agent translated the employer's requirements to the migrants before they went to their place of work. They learned that their salary of Rs. 5,000 per month would be paid through the agent and the first three months' salary would go to John who had put them in touch with the agent in Trivandrum. This they did not know in advance. They were told that if the employer did not like them, they would be brought back to this agent.

successes and issues across states, and ensured cohesive planning for the next year. Each year, these events included a mix of older and younger participants, and it was always very helpful for the new younger leaders to learn from the older leaders' experiences. Alongside these efforts, the national platform's campaigning continued to grow, with 2 meetings in 2017, 4 meetings in 2018 and 3 meetings in 2019. In 2017, the platform interacted with around 200 parliamentarians and the Department of Labour to push for comprehensive national legislation for domestic workers. This work was built upon in 2018 when the platform reacted to the new Labour Codes published by the government which claimed to be streamlining labour legislation to make it more effective but instead negated many of the gains that workers had fought for over years of struggle. A signature campaign against these codes was launched on Domestic Workers' Day, which was then presented to the central government on August 2nd, 2018 in a national rally in Delhi where over 10,000 workers from all over the country gathered. This work continued in 2019, where SEWA coordinated two two-day meetings of the National Platform where the Labour Resource Centre of the Bangalore Law School helped the participants understand the new labour codes and highlighted the ways in which informal workers and domestic workers had been excluded. The National Platform then used resources produced by the Law School after these sessions to lobby with the central government for changes to the codes.

However, this work was not without setbacks. As the 2018 final report states, 'when there is success in one area, there is disappointment in another'. In particular, whilst SEWA's work has certainly helped many, there are some that continue to be exploited by private recruiting agencies since they are desperate for work, meaning they do not tell SEWA they are migrating and subsequently end up in forced labour and abusive working conditions. Nevertheless, SEWA's continuous interactions have allowed more potential migrants to open up and realise the benefits of better planning, protection from placement agents, and safe migration practices. In addition, in early 2018, SEWA also faced a devastating setback as one of their coordinators became a placement agent, disrupting the work in Delhi as a new coordinator had to be trained which took time and funds. Furthermore, a final hurdle SEWA has faced in this programme is continued discrimination by domestic workers based on caste and gender



presentation. In particular, further intensive local interventions are needed for SEWA members to challenge social hierarchies and advocate for LGBT rights, despite India having national laws protecting these individuals now. The SEWA team who attended the IDWF International Congress in Cape Town in 2018 were amazed to see the vibrancy and social awareness of other workers on issues of racial discrimination and LGBT rights, so this is something that will need to be pursued in the future.

Finally, for the years 2020-2024, the IDWF has planned another 4-year programme with SEWA to continue the work of empowering domestic workers for their rights. For 2020, the objectives of this programme are to: expand the organising of domestic workers (reaching 2000 new members, renewing existing memberships, and maintaining 10-12 leaders in each state), reaching out to migrant workers (obtaining 200 new migrant worker members and celebrating International Migrant Workers' Day), reaching out to 1500 employers each year through the My Fair Home campaign (ensuring decent work for domestic workers), and

### **Case Study 10: The Danger of Fake Documents**

Nabeesa Abu lives in Nilambur taluk Mallapuram District, but went to the Middle East for domestic work. She was contacted by a local agent in Mallapuram and gave her passport to the agent to get a VISA. The local agent introduced Nabeesa to another agent in Kozhikode and promised her to get the VISA as soon as possible. Meanwhile she attended a village level seminar organized by SEWA about safe migration process. There she got information about the legal procedures, documents, how to verify the authenticity of the travel documents etc. She shared her story to the SEWA organiser, who assured her that SEWA would help check the authenticity of the VISA. Nabeesa constantly contacted her agent and demanded a copy of the VISA, which after one month she received. Nabeesa sent the copy to SEWA, who then submitted the document to the PoE office. The officials replied that the VISA given to Nabeesa was fake. It was originally issued for other people named Noorjahan and Mohammed Ismail, stamped from Bombay. The SEWA organiser informed Nabeesa and told her not to proceed with this VISA. Nabeesa called the agent and insisted to get her passport back. The agent shouted and then demanded Rs. 60,000 for the passport. The SEWA organizer then helped Nabeesa; she called the agent and threatened him. After two weeks of constant communication the agent gave the passport to Nabeesa without paying the money.

#### *Case Study 10: The Danger of Fake Documents*

developing further the work of the National Domestic Workers' Platform (including campaigning for comprehensive social security for domestic workers, ratifying C189, and lobbying for the inclusion of domestic workers in the new labour codes).



## Phase 2 of the ILO WIF Programme

The latest phase of these interlinked campaigns to empower domestic workers focus on reducing trafficking, and making migration safer. The goals here are to strengthen the organisation and unionisation, solidarity, and amplify the voice of domestic workers across Bihar, Delhi, Kerala, and Odisha. The primary means of doing so are by organising workers into local units to strategise and handle local issues related to their trade, and thus build leadership amongst these workers; connecting local workers to migrant workers; attacking and reducing the sources and causes of distress migration; and finally, advocating against violence in the workplace at the national and international level.

### Local Level Organising and Leadership Building

In the first three months of this phase, SEWA's basic strategy was to strengthen the organising of domestic workers in existing locations, and also identify areas for the expansion of SEWA's outreach in all states. It was also decided to systematise the functioning of the local base of the union in all locations; particular focus was given to identifying and developing leaders who could sustain and expand the union base. Part of these efforts included organising feedback sessions where agewans and organisers who had previously participated in SEWA training shared what they had learnt with local SEWA domestic worker members. One of the first of these was organised in Alleppey (Kerala) on 11th November; 50 domestic workers from 5 different districts of Alleppey gathered together and successfully shared training about violence at the workplace, and then discussed how the workers here could better organise their union through regular meetings and a group of strong leaders. Subsequently there were similar sessions in Delhi and Patna.

By the end of 2019, this work had progressed well. SEWA successfully built union bases in expanded outreach areas, local leaders began to take responsibility for local organising, and membership numbers grew through a focus on renewing memberships and securing new members. For instance, SEWA Delhi managed to: secure the admission of 11 young girls into a local government school in the New Ashok Nagar area, distribute union ID cards to members to assert their collective identity, participate in a rally against the new labour codes, and build a unit of 45 women led by Sapnaben (a domestic worker trained as an agewan) in East End Apartments who collectively successfully demanded an increase in wages.

All states also received various training inputs, including a state-level input on the prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace, and a national training session for domestic workers where the state leaders elected a national committee of domestic workers within the SEWA National Union – an impressive and unprecedented milestone. Further leadership training for 50 domestic worker leaders and organisers is planned for October 2020.

### Linking Local and Migrant Domestic Workers

Initially, this work began with discussions with local domestic workers in the cities about the issues of migration, particularly the reasons behind rural-urban migration, as these local domestic workers had not always been accepting of migrant workers, especially in Bihar and



Delhi. In Kerala, efforts were also made to get more detailed information on incoming young domestic workers from Tamil Nadu. After the devastating floods in North Kerala in August 2019, SEWA worked hard to help rehabilitate women in the area, laying groundwork for the training of 35 women in February 2020 to create a collective for food production. Furthermore, a particularly notable recent success of SEWA Kerala was a seminar on the 20th-22nd January 2020 exploring how workers and civil society organisations can work together to make cross-border migration along the Kerala-GCC corridor safer. 35 participants attended, both from India and GCC countries, representing: trade unions, support organisations, government manpower recruiting agencies, returnee migrant workers from the construction and domestic work sectors and representatives of the Work in Freedom Programme of the ILO. The first day and a half was spent getting to know each other - the organisations, the issues that exist around the migration of blue-collar workers and the work undertaken by each of the participants in dealing with these issues both at source and destination. Half a day was then spent discussing the causes, nature and potential solutions to the issues blue-collar cross-border migrant workers face, and the last day was spent building and prioritising a plan for action moving forwards. The team decided on 5 priority areas of action:

1. Working on policy/structural issues related to migration, both official and informal, at source and destination
2. Developing a more comprehensive module for pre-departure information
3. Reaching out to workers in the destination countries
4. Focus on issues around reintegration
5. Studies need to be taken up to provide a more informed understanding of the subject  
While this offers a clear, strong plan for SEWA and other civil society organisations to work with migrant workers moving forwards to ensure safe cross-border migration, this seminar also helped SEWA Kerala get the acceptance from the institutions of the government of Kerala as a active partner in facilitating safe migration for domestic workers and other blue collar workers.

Furthermore, SEWA Kerala has also opened a specialised skill training centre for women working in coastal communities in Malappuram (an area with a long history of migration to GCC countries). In 2019, 15 women under the age of 35 participated in this training, and it is hoped that in the future these programmes can be used as reintegration programmes for returnee migrants.

### Preventing Distress Migration for Women Workers

This work has taken place in the out-migration districts of Ganjam, Gajapathy and Khandmal in Orissa, and Peringimala in Kerala. Overall, the uptake of organic farming has brought good returns to the female farmers, and efforts to help women access government schemes and MGNREGA work has helped them stay in their home locations. In Ganjam, 13 members started chicken farming as a trial to see if they are interested in taking this forward, whilst 54 members in Godogotho got NREGS work for 65 days doing tree-planting and 39 women participated in millet growing. In Khandmal, workers participated in agricultural work and members planted groundnuts to sell later. They have also been busy with an animal survey that will help them start a goat-rearing programme. In Gajapathy, after SEWA's inputs 43 families are now farming



maize, 19 groups across 5 panchayats are farming organic vegetables, and in 7 villages the members received 2500 cashew seedlings from the agri department. While this may seem rather ordinary, the fact is that many of those who engaged in this work belong to the vulnerable groups who would otherwise be marginalised. Several of them were also supported by the more active members which is noteworthy. All these employment options have reduced distress migration, as they ensure there are opportunities for local workers to earn a viable income from home rather than migrating. Furthermore, in Peringimala some women who migrate have also joined the SEWA domestic workers' collective in Trivandrum to work under better-regulated conditions.

### Advocating for Domestic Workers on Violence in the Workplace

SEWA advocates for domestic workers nationally and internationally to draw attention to the problem of violence in the workplace. The National Platform for Domestic Workers has pursued its demand with the Parliamentary Committee for improved social security for domestic workers and comprehensive legislation along the same lines as C189. The Central Trade Unions within the National Platform have made a lot of progress in their understanding of domestic workers' issues, and the informal sector more broadly, due to SEWA's efforts. SEWA has also raised awareness of violence in the workplace by holding a series of sessions explaining the Anti Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Act, so that workers in the informal sector understand the various kinds of sexual harassment and what they can do about it.

#### Case Study 11: Violence at the Workplace

Sona Ben, one of SEWA's agewans, shared an incident at Pushpanjali Apartments in Patna where a 13-year-old girl worked as a domestic worker in one of the most affluent homes. The owner of the house often stared at her while she worked, but despite being aware of his bad intentions she continued to work there because she was in need of work and not able to find work anywhere else. Sometimes when she was in need of money she used to take it as an advance from him. One day when no one else except the owner was at home, he tried to sexually harass her, and the girl ran from one room to the other since the exit door was locked. It was only after her loud crying and howling that the owner unlocked the door. Sona ben said that they kept quiet about the incident because the girl's parents were poor and the owner was very affluent and powerful; they feared that he could bribe the police and get the girl in trouble with false charges. The girl just quietly left the work in that house.

#### *Case Study 11: Violence at the Workplace*

SEWA also collected together case studies from February 2019 onwards in order to lobby with the government to make the Local Complaints Committees active. Throughout 2019, SEWA also organised several discussions with both Platform and Non-Platform members regarding the OHS Code and Industrial Relations Code, with the input of the Law School in Bangalore; responses to these codes were then submitted to the Government.

### Challenges Faced by SEWA

This is not to say that this work has been easy, SEWA having also faced challenges. Navigating funding challenges and administrative burdens (such as reporting cycles) placed





upon the work by funders and partners, has resulted in some SEWA employees working without a salary until funds arrived (which was highly unjust, and additionally do so given the nature of the work). In addition, SEWA members were disturbed by the CAA/NRC happenings, later engaging in the anti-CAA protests; this made some of their work harder as there was a need to work against an atmosphere of hate in the base of the union and develop a better understanding of the Indian Constitution. For instance, in Munger, Bihar, agewans have reported members becoming increasingly divided, with some members refusing to sit in the same meetings with members of a different caste or religion. This has severely disrupted meetings; however, the agewans have taken on the responsibility to discuss these issues with the women involved and create more harmony and understanding between different groups. In addition, the impact of flooding in Orissa and Kerala also caused disruption to SEWA's work as emergency responses were needed and livelihoods were damaged; however, SEWA members were able to collectively assert themselves and obtain relief from the government, proving again the benefits of working together in a union. Finally, the most severe disruption to SEWA's planned work has been the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown; SEWA's response to this is outlined in this report's conclusion.



## Outreach, Outcomes, and Celebrations

Throughout this report we have seen the consistent energy, drive and outreach needed for SEWA to reach out to marginalised groups in order to support them through unionisation.

### IDWD Celebrations by SEWA: Trivandrum (Kerala)

In Kerala, 200 domestic workers gathered in Trivandrum to celebrate IDWD through a 'Rights Declaration Convention'. The SEWA President and SEWA Secretary highlighted the demands SEWA have made to both the Central and State governments for a comprehensive legislation for domestic workers. They stressed that the Domestic Workers' Board should be reimagined, as it should be a Board to regulate work and social security rather than just a Welfare Board. Representatives of different central trade unions and Residence Associations also participated in the discussions. The need for the ratification of ILO Convention 189 was also stressed by many speakers.

The Additional Labour Commissioner Sri. Alexander explained the schemes initiated by the government for domestic workers, and requested that the trade unions bring more of domestic workers' issues to their attention in the future and suggestions for how to improve this situation. After this, SEWA members asked him a variety of questions about the Welfare Board, their rights in the workplace and their social security eligibility.

*Case Study 12: IDWD Celebrations in Kerala*

*Case Study 13: IDWD Celebrations in Madhya Pradesh*

### IDWD Celebrations by SEWA: Shajapur (Madhya Pradesh)

In Madhya Pradesh, IDWD was celebrated as a day of freedom and dignity for domestic workers. SEWA organised a workshop where over 200 domestic workers from Indore and Bhopal gathered together to present their issues to Mr Vasudev Sarkar (Upper Commissioner of the MP Labour Department). These were: full payment is not given for their hard work; workers have worked for the same employers for years but are still not respected; monthly salaries are cut when employers cut workers' hours suddenly or workers have to take emergency leave; employers blame workers for stealing; workers don't have any identity cards or social security coverages; employers physically and emotionally torture and intimidate workers; workers have no protection; and workers' daughters are treated poorly when sent in their place for whatever reason. Mr Sarkar listened carefully to these concerns and said that he was aware of the work of SEWA; he told the workers that the Labour Department has formed a board of which he is Secretary and as soon as they receive the funds from central government, they will make identity cards for domestic workers. A memorandum of the issues raised was also sent in a letter to the Principal Secretary of the Labour Department, and it was requested that laws should be made for domestic workers and they should be covered under the minimum wage act. The rest of the day was then spent celebrating with games and competitions amongst the workers. This was a public attraction, and the press arrived and reported on the day in all the local newspapers, raising wider public awareness of domestic workers' plight.

One essential method of reaching out to as many people as possible, and raising awareness about domestic workers', migrant workers' and women's issues is through celebrating international events: International Domestic Workers' Day (16th June), International Migrant Workers' Day (18th December) and International Women's Day (8th March). Each year,



SEWA, with the support of the IDWF, holds large celebrations in states across India to mark these occasions, using them as an opportunity to galvanise these groups, increase SEWA's membership, and gain the attention of local and national government so that they know these issues must be tackled. Reports from the celebrations of International Domestic Workers' Day 2015 are given below as examples of the type of large-scale organising this involves.

In Orissa, IDWD was celebrated by each of SEWA's partners (Aaina, Pragati, LWSIT and SFDC) in the districts they were working in. A total of 470 workers from several trades participated and observed the day across both urban and rural areas.

#### *Case Study 14: Aaina celebrates IDWD*

##### **IDWD Celebrations by SEWA Partners: Aaina**

Aaina arranged a public meeting at New Hatapada, G. Udaygiri block where 111 female domestic workers came together to discuss their rights with the public and important guests, including the NAC Charmain Mr P. Sanjeeb Patro, Block Chairman Mr Basanta ku. Pradhan, and journalist Mr Arun Sadhangi. In this meeting, firstly Ritanjali Bagarti (the Project Coordinator) gave a summary of the IDWD celebration's history, explained the WIF project undertaken by SEWA and Aaina in Orissa, and gave details about C189 and the Government of India's responsibility to domestic workers to ratify it. Speeches were then given by the journalist, NAC Chairman, and Block Chairman, where they highlighted the importance of IDWD, the need for the protection of migrant women workers and domestic workers, the components of safe migration, and how migration for work can quickly turn into dangerous trafficking. The meeting was formally ended with a vote of thanks, before the guests waved flags to start off a rally comprised of all the women standing behind one another carrying placards which highlight the issues of female domestic workers. This gave very wide visibility to the SEWA domestic workers' network and covered the whole town, spreading the message that domestic workers' rights must be protected and expanded

#### *Case Study 15: Pragati and IDWD*

##### **IDWD Celebrations by SEWA Partners: Pragati**

Pragati also had a public meeting at the Panchayat level, which 112 workers from several trades participated in. The Chief Guest, the Assistant Secretary of the Construction Workers' Association, inaugurated the meeting by lighting candles. Ms Baijayanti from Pragati then gave an introductory speech summarising C189, the rights of domestic workers, and how the Orissa union unites workers to collectively support each other and advocate for their rights. Speeches were then given by Utkal Gramin, a bank manager from Gundiadihi who spoke about accidental insurance and loan schemes available to domestic workers, and Panchayat Sarapanches from Gundiadihi, Hurmei and Alapaka who discussed the role of PRI in migration issues and spoke about the need for safe migration and registration in panchayats before migrants leave. A vote of thanks was given by Ms. Bijayanti, then a march with the workers holding placards and chanting slogans proceeded, crossing the entire Panchayat.



### **IDWD Celebrations by SEWA Partners: LWSIT**

LWSIT celebrated IDWD at Gandhi Bhawan in Cuttack. 147 domestic workers from the several slums in Cuttack participated and the Chief Guest was Mr. Radgkant Sethy, the General Secretary of AICTU-Bhubaneswar. After Ms. Ranjulata from LWSIT gave a welcome speech introducing the objectives for the day, Ms. Heena from NAWO gave a speech highlighted the key messages of the programme, described C189 and its need for ratification, discussed how workers were feeling in light of a new union soon being formed in Orissa, and spoke about how responsible leaders would be needed to effectively carry forward the union's goals in the long term. After this extensive and rousing speech, the chief guest gave a speech advocating for the rights of workers, particularly focussing on the need for labour protections for children and how the unionisation of workers is highly important at this time when the central and state government is neglecting them. Finally, some workers raised their hands and shared the issues they were facing with the group, and the meeting finished with a vote of thanks given by the organiser, Ms. Narmada Swain.

### **IDWD Celebrations by SEWA Partners: SFDC**

The SFDC held a public meeting celebrating IDWD in Mohana, Gajapati District. The meeting was attended by over 100 participants, and guests included: the Zilla Parishad member of Mohana block (the chief guest), the Block Chairman, the Simiti Sbhya of Katama Panchayata, the lady OIC of Mohana police station, and social activists Mr Dora Babu and Susila Dandasena. During the meeting, discussions were held concerning: distress migration of local domestic workers, the need for awareness about safe migration, the opportunities for employment and skill development within the block, the torture of domestic workers in other states, bonded labour, protections within the police force for women, the need for women's education to reduce their exploitation, and the need to consider male domestic workers too who often have very low salaries and do jobs like sweeping, cleaning and security. Programme Coordinator Mr. Jeevan explained how we must treat domestic workers with the same respect given to other workers, and we must recognise their work by advocating for them to receive a decent wage and living conditions. Ms. Saswati Jena ended the meeting with a vote of thanks, and the participants all shared food together afterwards.

### *Case Study 17: SDFC Celebrates IDWD*

In this story, we have seen the immense amount that SEWA has achieved from 2015 onwards through the Work In Freedom programme, intensive interventions in Ganjam, and IDWF projects, which have all: empowered domestic workers to secure and expand their rights, increased safe migration, and reduced trafficking and distress migration. This has been an uphill battle; SEWA has faced continued hurdles and challenges, but its team of workers, leaders, and coordinators have worked tirelessly to achieve this mission. The active interaction with other unions and organizations that work with domestic workers has also help SEWA to keep the national and international perspectives in mind while also learning and sharing with other



## Covid-19 Response and Looking to the Future

Nevertheless, the work continues, and becomes ever more complex in the time of Covid-19. This pandemic affects domestic workers extremely severely as many have been discriminated against and laid off, whilst others continue to work but face unsafe working conditions. The effects on migrant workers have been particularly devastating; many were stranded away from home under lockdown, and some have asserted their right to go home by undertaking dangerous walks over hundreds of kilometres to return.

SEWA members spontaneously responded to the issue of stranded and desperate migrants in many states. In Delhi, they informed migrants how to access food and even participated in government programmes of food distribution as they had access to the areas where the migrants lived. They also identified 100 migrant worker families containing women and children and tried to arrange buses back to Patna, but this did not materialize.

### Local Level Plans

- Informing members and others of ways to reduce the spread of Covid-19, including: washing hands with soap frequently, resting and quarantining if you have symptoms (dry cough, fever, or headache), and taking homeopathic medicines such as Ars Alb to boost the immune system.
- Engaging with the panchayat system to reach out to migrants through local government and stimulate local development
- Facilitating proper quarantine mechanisms for the returnee migrants through putting pressure on the Sarapanch, providing food support where possible, and informing local members that migrants should not be discriminated against but helped to remain in quarantine for the good of the whole community.
- Registering as many migrants as possible by collecting their personal information.
- Ensuring local work through engaging with NREGS and local bodies, and seeing that migrants get job cards. It is best if SEWA proposes work that also creates local assets, such as field bunding, deepening water tanks, preparing compost, or social forestry.

In Kerala, where the government was more proactive, there were still migrants that were out of the government radar and SEWA organisers helped link them to the government distribution system. SEWA-Kerala was also able to effectively use SEWA's large national network to respond to members in Bengal and Orissa who sought information and assistance for their husbands in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. They also facilitated the workers to get onto the special trains to return home and coordinated at the receiving end to see that workers were properly cared for during quarantine.

In Jaipur, SEWA organisers got the government to send special buses with migrants back to UP. Around 78 migrants were sent home in this way, and SEWA also supported a large remaining group of pregnant women and others who could not return home, providing them with food. Furthermore, SEWA subsequently helped 500 more migrants get buses back



home with food, whilst 400 migrants from Bihar and AP were helped back to UP with the assistance of the MLA and Corporators.

In Ahmedabad, SEWA members supported over 500 migrants with cooked food twice a day for a whole month, and registered migrants so that they could access rations from the government. In Surat, Gujarat, the Mahila Housing SEWA Trust, supported by Lok Swasthya Mandli through the 2 SSKs in areas where many migrant workers live (Pandésara and Nayagam), has also been reaching out to migrants from Orissa, Bihar and Maharashtra. The SSKs helped migrants link with the local authorities, get relief kits and register online, thereby protecting them from touts who were charging Rs 700-800 per migrant worker just to register them online. Furthermore, SEWA negotiated a better deal for migrants with the Surat Municipal Corporation Officers through their contacts there. For the migrants who were stranded towards the end, SEWA negotiated with the Collector to transport them back from Surat to Agra.

In MP, SEWA Nigrani Samitis prepared a list of migrant workers and, with the support of the Health Department, did health check-ups and referred workers to hospitals as needed. A total of 4351 workers were given health checks in this way. SEWA NS also partnered with the panchayat to arrange quarantine in schools and other facilities, and mobilised local candles and mosquito nets to reduce mosquito-borne disease. Furthermore, SEWA NS also supported the panchayat by: providing cooked food for 15 days for 4,351 workers, facilitating access to the Indian Public Distribution System under the PM Garib Kalyan Scheme for workers, and obtaining 5kg of grain for migrant workers who did not have food coupons. SEWA NS also negotiated Take Home Rations from the WCD Department for 469 migrant workers (a service which had previously been shut down during lockdown).

### State Level Plans

- Marketing support facilities for agricultural and home-based production through working with the local administration.
- Gradually ensuring local SEWAs start policy interventions to secure local livelihoods
- Building local institutions to support local livelihoods in strategic locations

When the trains started moving, SEWA teams in Bihar, Orissa, and Bengal immediately went to their areas' quarantine centres to see if the migrants were receiving food, which they weren't. In some places workers fled from quarantine as they were starving. SEWA organisers discussed these issues with the authorities and after 2-3 days food reached the quarantine centres. In the areas around Anand and adjoining districts in Gujarat, SEWA organisers interacted with migrant workers as they returned to the villages. They were not properly quarantined as the local areas had not organised anything specific, risking spreading Covid-19 if returnees carry the virus. Moreover, several of the male returnees were skilled workers; these men then undertook local NREGS work which meant that local women lost their jobs in this scheme. In areas where the migrant workers had land which they had leased to landless labour, they often took this land back for cultivation, leaving



significant numbers of jobless people with no land to till now. Therefore, the situation is highly complex and further interventions are needed moving forwards.

In several states, SEWA organisers began getting the names, telephone numbers and addresses of the migrants – both at home and where they had worked – with around 3,000 contacts obtained at present. Although this only covers the areas where SEWA is active, the idea was to both better understand migration corridors in these areas, and also to keep in touch with people in these areas in the coming months. Already SEWA has discovered significant migration corridors between Katihar and Kerala, and Kerala and Murshidabad, which will inform future operations supporting migrant workers here.

### National Level Plans

*The National SEWA Union will send telephone messages to the 2,000 migrant workers for whom SEWA has contact details, telling returned migrants that they need to:*

- Register in the Construction Workers' Welfare Board
- Get a workers' job card from their panchayat
- Start NREGS work
- If they have land, begin agriculture but do not take loans from contractors for this –
- instead, contract the Department of Agriculture.
- Do not return to the city with a contractor unless they see their registration certificate and get a written contract.
- For more information, contact the SEWA Shakti Kendra

At present, more than half of India's internal migrants have returned home, and the rest are either in their destination state or somewhere midway. However, even now, some are returning to their destination states or being flown back by their employers. No matter how much they want to remain at home, the socio-economic situations and the lures of contractors will push them to migrate again. While it is important to assist workers in local-level livelihood options, moving forwards SEWA needs to actively get involved in the process of visibilising and institutionalising migration to make it safer. The first step for this will be ensuring a proper documentation system for migrants, whilst the second step will be understanding migration corridors as this allows more intensive future interventions. In addition, SEWA also needs to protect workers who stay at home from local exploitation, particularly through contract farming where investors give loans to farmers in advance of growing produce which they promise to buy at a certain agreed price (often much lower than market prices) – this is often a lose-lose situation for farmers as if their crops fail they have to repay the money, whilst if yields are good the contractor often pay a lower price than what was promised. In response to these issues, SEWA has already developed local-level, state-level and national-level plans for intervention. Hence, whilst the world faces unprecedented challenges, SEWA continues to support domestic workers and migrant workers in the best way it can, adapting its approach to support these workers in a whole new way as we fight the impacts of Covid-19. There is no doubt that, moving forwards, SEWA will continue to advocate powerfully for the rights of domestic workers and safe migration of migrant workers until these have been secured for all at all scales - the international, national, state, district and local.





Figure 6: National Training for Domestic Workers 2019



Figure 7: National Domestic Workers Trade Committee

