

Women workers of the city unite here

LABOUR RIGHTS NGO LEARN's trade union helps women in the informal sector avail of the welfare schemes they are entitled to

Puja Pednekar

puja.pednekar@hindustantimes.com

MUMBAI: After spending the morning cooking, filling water and sending her children to school, Sunita Jaiswar sits down to knead and roll out four to five kilos of papad every day.

This earns Jaiswar, who supports her husband and children by herself, Rs150 a day, which she divides between rent, electricity bills, school expenses and supplies for her modest home in Dharavi.

But unlike many others who work from home for small-scale industries, Jaiswar and many other women in her neighbourhood are fully aware of their rights, have uniform pay and facilities that ensure their work is streamlined.

Empowered by Labour Education and Research Network (LEARN) workers' union, Jaiswar has learnt to demand what is required. "Like me, many of my neighbours have been members of LEARN for close to four or five years now. The company we work for pays all of us uniformly and sends a van when we need to pick up papad dough from the factory," she said.

The efforts of women like Jaiswar play an often invisible, but large role in India's business sector. They produce a vast amount of low-cost products—from electronics, garments and footwear to trinkets, jewellery and food—which are often sold in shopping malls or exported at high prices. However, they receive a minuscule share of the profits, says Indira Gartenberg, a PhD student working with LEARN.

The non-government organisation has been working since 2001 to help such women improve their earnings by negotiating better work and working conditions. The NGO is operational in Mumbai, Nashik, Solapur and Nagpur. So far, around 7,000 women



■ Dharavi resident Sunita Jaiswar (right), who rolls papads at her home, is a part of LEARN's trade union, along with 7,000 others from Mumbai, Nashik, Solapur and Nagpur.

PRODIP GUHA

workers have joined the union, which is registered with the state government. Most of them belong to the informal sectors, working from home or as domestic help, street vendors, solid waste pickers and mess, tiffin or catering workers.

"We encourage them to build direct links with employers to increase returns on creative work, eliminating the middleman, and also assert their rights," Gartenberg said.

LEARN also facilitates the registration of domestic workers in the welfare board and assists them when there is conflict with employers. "Knowing that domestic workers are often illiterate or semi-literate, some owners even levy false allegations on them. We help them when there is a police investigation in such false cases," said Fatima Shaikh, general

secretary of the union, who was a domestic worker herself.

Shaikh says the women eagerly renew their membership every year as the NGO holds regular skill improvement training, computer classes, medical camps and other programmes. Recently, they held a programme along with Rotary Club to create awareness for pregnant women.

Abhishek Sawant, general secretary of the NGO, said "Although home-based workers are a majority in the workforce, they are a minority in the decision making spheres. They have to work 24 hours a day, they do not have any organised work culture, no social security benefits or other perks. We are trying to be a catalyst for workers' activism."

LEARN also helps the workers with things like getting

ration cards, opening bank accounts and registering in government welfare boards. They seek to provide crèche facilities, so the women can leave their children in the care of professionals.

Perhaps the NGO's most important work, however, is pushing for better rights for these women by lobbying for improved access to public distribution systems, housing, urban infrastructure, health-care, sanitation and access to medical aid.

Sharit Bhowmik, president and founder member, said "We started the NGO as we realised that there were no trade unions to represent the unorganised sector. We work to empower women workers to get their basic rights."

In the larger scheme of things, the benefits the NGO

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You can also vote online on the microsite www.htformumbaiawards.com

provides to the women are not only monetary and legal, they are also psychological and inter-personal.

"I was a home-based worker for many years. There was a time I would not even have stepped out of my home. After joining the union, I have realised my identity as a worker and my independence. It has made me confident," said Aatmadevi Jaiswal, president of the union, home-based workers.

ABOUT LEARN

■ Labour Education and Research Network (LEARN) was formed in 2001 by a group of activists and university teachers. Sharit Bhowmik, one of the founders of LEARN, is a professor of labour studies at the Tata Institute of Social Science

■ As of 2013, 7,000 women have joined the organisation. The membership includes home based workers, domestic workers, street vendors, micro factory workers, garment workers and ragpickers among others

■ The objectives of LEARN are to assist in building collectivisation of workers in informal employment and also to conduct research

■ It also provides training to women workers, crèche services, help on getting ration cards and bank accounts, empowers adolescent girls and generates literature on the informal urban economy.

THE AWARDS

The HT for Mumbai awards are a recognition of individuals and organisations that have worked tirelessly and selflessly to make life in Mumbai better. The parameters used to shortlist them were: the individual/organisation should have been active for the last five years, should have had a positive impact on public policy or the city, should have been a changemaker and should have been proactive on an issue without waiting for intervention from authorities.

The panel of judges comprised Dr Aroon Tikedar, well-known historian and author; Chandra lyengar, former bureaucrat; Rahul Bose, actor and activist; Soumya Bhattacharya, editor, Hindustan Times, Mumbai; and Smruti Koplikar, editor (special assignments), Hindustan Times, Mumbai.

The shortlists are in two categories — for individuals and organisations. Each shortlist comprises six candidates. The panel of judges will select three winners from each category. Their names will be announced at the HT for Mumbai Awards ceremony later this month.

TOMORROW:



▶ I HAVE SEEN THE ORGANISATION WORK WITH SLUM CHILDREN AMONG THEIR OTHER ACTIVITIES. THEY HAVE BEEN SINCERE IN THEIR WORK.

ABHAY PETHE, professor of economics, University of Mumbai

▶ THE UNION HAS MADE ME REALISE THAT I AM NOT ALONE. I CAN STAND UP FOR MY RIGHTS. IT HELPS ME AND MY FAMILY.

SUNITA JAISWAR, home-based worker from Dharavi



▶ LEARN IS MAKING A HUGE IMPACT ON THE UNORGANISED SECTOR. VERY FEW ARE WILLING TO WORK UNDER SUCH DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES.

ARCHANA SAHAY, manager, community relations, Cisco