

# **ORGANISING THE UNORGANISED: MUMBAI'S HOME WORKERS LEAD THE WAY**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In 1982, Maria Mies wrote a path-breaking account of the lace makers in an Indian village called Narsapur. Three decades later, in 2012, she revisited the village and found that much of the work and working conditions in Narsapur have remained the same. Working from their homes, the lace makers were and are underpaid and undervalued. The only difference, Mies found, is that the number of lace makers has increased in Narsapur and the number of home-workers has increased worldwide.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) Home Work Convention C177, 1996, defines home-based work (or home-work) as work carried out by a person:

- in his or her home or in other premises of his or her choice, other than the workplace of the employer
- for remuneration
- which results in a product or service as specified by the employer.

In the Indian context, two categories of home-based workers (HBWs)<sup>3</sup> exist – those who work on a piece-rate basis as part of a supply chain, and the self-employed who work as micro-entrepreneurs from their homes. Homenet South Asia<sup>4</sup> estimates that there are approximately 50 million home-workers in South Asia. Of these, approximately 30 million are in India, according to Homenet India.<sup>5</sup> Mumbai's slums are filled with home-workers, most of whom are women engaged in providing low-paid manufacturing and/or services from their homes or common community areas. This makes them relatively invisible compared to other informal-sector workers such as street vendors or rag pickers. Most home-workers do not even consider themselves 'workers' and consider their work as 'timepass' or an activity meant for filling free time. Hardly any membership-based organizations represent their voices as working individuals.

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, the words home-based worker and home-worker are used interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> Homenet South Asia, established in 2000, is a regional network of home-based workers' (HBWs) organizations in South Asia. It was formed to give visibility to home-based workers and their issues, to advocate for national policies, to strengthen grassroots and membership-based organizations of home-based workers, and to create and strengthen South Asian networks of home-based workers. (See their website at [http://www.homenetsouthasia.net/HomeNet\\_South\\_Asia\\_and\\_Overview.html](http://www.homenetsouthasia.net/HomeNet_South_Asia_and_Overview.html), accessed 20 October 2011.)

<sup>5</sup> Homenet India, established in 2004, is the India chapter of Homenet South Asia (<http://homenetindia.org>, accessed 20 October 2011).

This invisibility is further compounded by the fact that they are missing from all official data and statistics on labour as well as from mainstream research. This paper attempts to bridge this gap by highlighting the work and working conditions of home-workers in Mumbai's slums and the experiences of organizing them by a trade union in Mumbai. It relies largely on findings of a mapping study in 2011, commissioned by Homenet India and conducted by the Labour Education and Research Network (LEARN), a trade union of informal-sector female workers in Mumbai.

## **ABOUT LEARN**

LEARN is a non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to mobilizing female informal-sector workers. It was founded in 2008 by Professor Sharit Bhowmik, along with senior academics, labour activists and lawyers, to strengthen the understanding of labour issues, focusing on the informal-sector workforce. The membership of LEARN includes home-based workers, domestic workers, street vendors, micro-factory workers and garment workers in three districts of Maharashtra state, namely, Mumbai, Nashik and Solapur. The objectives of LEARN are to assist in building collectivization of female workers in informal employment and also to conduct in-depth research so as to increase our understanding of the working class and to inform policy. With these broad objectives, LEARN has been successful in bringing together a dispersed workforce and registering individuals as trade-union members, thereby providing them with identities of workers. This trade union is named LEARN Mahila Kamgar Sangathana (LMKS),<sup>6</sup> and is registered as a state-level trade union in Maharashtra. It has been able to raise awareness among the members about their rights to fair treatment as workers. This process aims not only to collectively address issues pertaining to worker's rights, but also to collectively tackle the common issues of work and life from the bottom up. The ultimate aim is to induce an elevated 'sense of selfhood' (Kabeer, 2013) as well as impressing the significance of a collective voice. The notion of elevated self-hood is understood here as the enhanced self-image of an individual as a result of being in a collective.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In 2011, HomeNet India commissioned LEARN to conduct a mapping exercise in the state of Maharashtra. Three districts of Maharashtra – Mumbai, Nashik and Solapur – were chosen for the study because LEARN has a presence in these districts. A total of one hundred forty-six interviews were conducted from 28 October to 7 December 2011. Five areas<sup>7</sup> were examined in

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<sup>6</sup> LEARN Women Workers' Union. The NGO operates mainly through its trade union as far as mobilizing, collective bargaining and training activities are concerned. LEARN has also established LEARN Mahila Adhar Kendra (LEARN Women's Support Centre) and LEARN Medical Adhar Kendra (LEARN Medical Aid Centre).

<sup>7</sup> The entry into areas of Dharavi was based largely on the researchers' involvement with LEARN and familiarity with the respondents. Access to the other areas was a result of the snowball sampling method – that is, those familiar to the researchers suggested other home-workers known to them (through networks of family, caste, place of origin and friends) in several parts of the city. The researchers express heartfelt gratitude to the office bearers and leaders of LEARN Mumbai, Nashik and Solapur; particularly Ms Atmadevi Jaiswar (Mumbai), Ms Sarojini Tamshetty (Solapur), Mr Rana Shinde, Ms Vimal Porge and Ms Surekha Ahire (Nashik). For access to their neighbourhood in Ghatkopar, we wish to thank Mr Radheshyam Jaiswar and his sister Ms Sunita, who also gave us ideas on home-work in Shivaji Nagar, an area known to them through their friends' networks. Mr and Mrs Dagdu Deshmukh

Mumbai– Amrut Nagar (Ghatkopar), Panjrapol (Deonar), Lallubhai Compound (Mankhurd), Shivaji Nagar (Mankhurd) and Rajeev Gandhi Nagar (Dharavi). This included seventy-six interviews – seventy with workers and six with key persons<sup>8</sup>. This paper will focus on some of the findings from Mumbai.

Qualitative methods of data collection were used for this study. Semi-structured interviews with an open-ended format were conducted with workers, key informants and in some cases, the local political representatives. Information regarding the tasks performed, payment and working conditions was sought from the workers as well as the key persons. Special focus was given to information regarding occupational health hazards. Lastly, workers were asked to recommend ways of improving their work and life.

This paper seeks to present the findings from two of the five areas studied for mapping, namely Amrut Nagar and Dharavi. It attempts to show the variety of work, the conditions in which work is done, and the problems faced by home-workers in Mumbai's slums. It showcases the process and impact of organizing home-workers in Dharavi. More importantly, it points to the importance of further research on home-workers, stating that organizing efforts in Amrut Nagar were a direct result of this mapping exercise. The concluding section sums up the observations, and reflects on some of the core issues from the field that could have policy implications.

## **MUMBAI'S SLUMS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE FIELDWORK AREAS**

Before delving into the work and life of home-workers, a short description of the slum areas housing them is in order. According to the 2011 census, 78 per cent of Mumbai's population lives in slums (Lewis 2011). The city has the highest population density in the state of Maharashtra, with 20,038 persons per square kilometre (sq km) in the island city (also known as South Mumbai) and 20,925 persons per sq km in the suburbs. Both slums considered for the purpose of this paper – Amrut Nagar and Dharavi – are located in the suburbs. Families residing in Amrut Nagar comprise two main migrant groups, from the states of Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh (UP). Sanitation facilities are grossly inadequate and in urgent need of repairs. Scarcity and short-time availability of water has caused multiple and sometimes violent fights among families. There are open sewers in almost all parts of the slum, although some were covered with concrete slabs. Pigs, rats, dogs and cats run in the sewers and then in the residential areas.

Dharavi is home to roughly one million people and several thousand micro and small manufacturing enterprises. Even though Dharavi was found to be cheaper than Amrut Nagar in terms of house rent, water costs and health care expenses, its density and congestion was much higher.

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graciously offered their home for interactions with respondents in Baiganwadi (Shivaji Nagar). Foray into the areas of Panjrapol and Lallubhai Compound was made possible by Ms Bebi M. Kharate and her son Mr Amar Kharate, who also cheerfully accompanied us through the entire fieldwork phase.

<sup>8</sup> By keypersons/ key informants (used interchangeably), we refer to those stakeholders that are not home workers, but play some or the other important role in the community-- such as local political heavyweights or leaders of certain religious /or caste groups. It also includes people who facilitated our entry as researchers into those areas.

## HOME-BASED WORK IN AMRUT NAGAR AND DHARAVI

In home-based manufacturing or assembly of products, the term ‘gross’ (loosely pronounced as ‘*gruss*’ by the workers) is important. One ‘gross’ refers to twelve dozen or one hundred forty-four pieces. As far as home-work is concerned, it is often the basic unit of transaction in that orders are taken and returned quoting the number of ‘gross’ provided or made. Most home-workers make products or provide services in the time that is available after performing their domestic chores and fulfilling their family’s needs. Often, home-work involves the use of basic tools and materials that are available in the home of the worker, such as kerosene cans, chairs and so on.

### Amrut Nagar

In the Amrut Nagar area, the largest number of female respondents was found to be involved in tying tassels at the end of *dupattas* – veils or long stoles commonly worn by Indian women. The work was seasonal in nature, available only a few months of the year, and therefore the volume and frequency of orders was inconsistent. Since the work required precision and accurate tying of knots in a pattern, most workers could make no more than one to two dozen in a day. The rate per piece used to be Rs30 per dozen, but since late 2007 it came down to Rs24 per dozen (Rs2 per piece). This is perhaps the result of the global recession’s impact on the garment industry. The second largest group of workers in Amrut Nagar was women tying satin tassels at both ends of *rakhis* – thread bracelets tied on a man’s wrist by his sister to mark a traditional festival. The home-workers were paid Rs7 per gross (Rs0.048 per piece). Since the task required precision, most workers managed to complete up to two gross per day.<sup>9</sup>

The third-largest cohort of workers in Amrut Nagar was that of necklace-thread embellishers working for both the artificial and real gold/silver jewellery industry. In this trade, three distinct tasks were performed by different sets of workers. The first group of workers tied golden and red threads at the end of the necklace, defining its ends. This task paid Rs10 per gross (Rs0.069 per piece). The next set of workers added a length-adjusting mechanism to the necklace, which brought Rs6 per gross (Rs0.041 per piece). The third group of workers was engaged in meticulously tying tassels at the end of the necklace threads. A worker required two days to complete one gross, which brought Rs7 (Rs0.048 per piece).

Some workers were keychain makers, involved in assembling the main ring of the keychain with several smaller rings and attaching bells, beads and other colourful plastic or metal trinkets. The rate was Rs14 per gross (Rs0.097 per piece); two gross could be completed in a day.

Mantle-making, or making incandescent mantles for paraffin lamps (popularly known as petromax lamps), was the only trade where men were found to be involved in home-based work (two respondents) along with their wives. The material was dropped every week by a company. The fabric of the mantles was stretched, ironed and packed in bunches of two hundred. The

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<sup>9</sup> When discussing the earnings of home-workers, it is necessary to be mindful of the poverty line defined by the Government of India, which is at Rs28.65 per day for urban areas (<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-poverty-line-now-lowered-to-rs-28-per-day/1/178483.html>). Clearly, most home-workers fall into the category of workers who earn much less per day than this already low amount.

workers were paid Rs100 for 1000 pieces (Rs0.1 per piece). One couple produced up to 3000 pieces per day.

The mantle makers and the single-tailoring entrepreneurs sat on chairs to do their work. Most other workers sat on the floor of their homes. At the ground level of the homes, which included the kitchen and washing area, there was little space for *dupatta* makers to spread out fabric and other embellishment materials. They did not switch on lights or fans while working. The television, however, was on in almost all households where workers performed the work alone or with children at home.

Some women making *dupattas* preferred to sit together in a circle and work on a public platform built under a *peepul* tree or in a common community area. While working, they chatted about their lives, gossiped and joked about the recent developments in the community and in national politics; they also lamented the nasty behaviour of the males in their families and community. The conversations served to provide a distraction as they worked, and they did not require other forms of entertainments such as TVs to break the monotonous nature of the work. They also often shared the tools that helped them in their work.

All the workers (except mantle makers) had to pick up the material from the middleman's home, shop or warehouse and deliver the processed goods back to him or her – a distance they covered by foot. All of them complained of backaches, shoulder aches and leg pain. Some also talked of gastrointestinal problems due to constant sitting and bending while doing the work. Those involved in minute precision work talked of gradually deteriorating vision as well. Some workers involved in necklace thread embellishment complained of persistent coughs and colds due to inhalation of lint from the thin strands of tassels and threads. Inconsistency of volume and frequency of orders made them 'over-value' the times when they got work, even if it was grossly underpaid.

## **Dharavi**

The case of Dharavi's home-workers was in many ways similar but in some ways different from Amrut Nagar. First, home-work in this area is sourced not only from micro and small enterprises inside Dharavi, but also from big and small brands. Second, the presence of an organization representing the workers made a marked difference in their personal and professional lives. Lastly, a number of children and teenagers, especially female, were also involved in Dharavi's home-work.

Home-based garment embellishment tasks in Dharavi essentially refers to sequin and bead embellishment on pre-embroidered fabric. It involves hand-sewing sequins and beads in a specified pattern. 'Light [embellishment] work' fetches Rs2–3 per piece, and 'heavy [embellishment] work' pays Rs5 per piece. At this point, it is important to state that the rate of Rs5 per piece was the result of a three-day struggle by home-workers in the area. Details of this great effort are discussed in the following section. In the case of 'light work', twenty to twenty-five pieces could be made by a worker in a day, while in the case of the 'heavy work', ten to twelve pieces could be completed per day. Individual capacity, speed and pressure of domestic

chores varies, which determines the quantity produced per day. The women complain of dismal sanitation facilities and water problems, adding to their plight in performing a task that causes headaches, leg pains, frequent fevers, common colds and severe strain on the eyes.

Dharavi potter's village, *Kumbharwada*, is very well known. Painting, decoration and embellishment of some clay items is done in the homes of Dharavi residents. Clay lamps come in various sizes and shapes. Many children and adolescents, mainly girls, are involved in painting these lamps. The workers go to the potter to pick up the lamps, paint, kerosene, adhesive and other decorative materials. In the case of the regular lamps, only painting needs to be done. However, for fancier lamps requiring more embellishment, the lamps are painted and then pieces of dazzling lace are pasted on them. The final step is packing the lamps in plastic bags and delivering them to the potter. The worker is paid Rs6 for one hundred painted lamps (Rs0.06 per piece), independent of the amount of work required.

Belt-weaving is another widespread home-based trade in Dharavi. As a general practice, the middleman drops off strands of leather or plastic, pre-cut by machines in some manufacturing unit within Dharavi. In addition to women, many girls are involved in making complicated plait-like patterns on these belts. First, three to four strands are tied to a nail or hook on a wall or pillar. This is followed by plaiting systematic, intricate patterns, which requires concentration, dexterity and intensive eye-hand coordination. No needles or threads are used. Most workers perform this task standing. Once ready, these belts are sent back to the manufacturing units within or outside Dharavi, to be used for waist belts, straps for handbags and fancy sandals. On an average, children and adolescents make fifteen pieces a day and adults make thirty per day. The payment per belt ranges from Rs3–5.

## **ORGANISING THE UNORGANISED**

Atmadevi Jaiswar, 31, a home-worker from Dharavi and a trade union leader in LMKS, created history in 2009. She was engaged in low-paid sequins embellishment work on garments, like the other women in her area (Rajiv Gandhi Nagar), prior to being a fulltime trade union activist. During one of her field visits for a baseline survey on income for home-work, she discovered that, for the same order delivered in various lanes of her area, the middleman was making varying payments. Some got Rs1 per piece, others made Rs1.50 per piece, and a few got Rs2 per piece. She was shocked and found this very unfair. In one of her area meetings, she shared her discovery with her members. They, too, were appalled. Atmadevi, along with her colleagues in the union, then developed a strategy for collective action.

She proposed to her area members the idea of collectively 'not taking work' for a few days, until the middleman paid every worker Rs2 per piece, the highest rate then available.

Though the women agreed that the payment system was unfair, they were not willing to give up their work and daily income, and dismissed her proposal. However, Atmadevi did not give up. She conducted three more meetings in the same area, where attendance went up and down depending on how soon the idea of unequal treatment caught up with her members. At the end of the third meeting, Atmadevi said, '[You all must remember that] all we sisters do the same type

of work, put in the same amount of hard labour, then why should we all not be paid the same? Do you agree with me or not? We are not animals and they are treating us [as if we were]. Just tell me, how long are you going to continue to work for them, when you know your sister in the next lane is getting more money for the same work? And those of you who are getting more than others, can you live with the idea that your sister in the next lane is being exploited and paid less than you for the same work?’

Atmadevi’s appeal had an effect. A decision was made, and the members agreed that they would not take any work until all of them got the same rate per piece, for the present and the future. The middleman showed up the next day, the women put forward their demand for Rs2 per piece, to which he simply did not agree. He went back with all the fabric and embellishment materials, convinced that the next day workers would come around and it would again be ‘business as usual’. However, the women held out for three days. In this period, his house started filling up with unembellished fabric and embellishment materials. His employer was under pressure to send back the consignments to those further up in the supply chain, presumably retailers or distributors or export houses. The middleman informed his employer about the workers’ ‘strike’. Out of desperation, the employer decided to increase every worker’s piece rate to Rs5. This was a major victory for the workers. Being organized as a collective suddenly made sense and assumed even more importance for them.

Atmadevi’s approach worked for a number of reasons, and therefore has several key teachings for organising efforts in the informal sector. Firstly, she raised the consciousness of the women to consider themselves workers in a ‘matter of fact’ way. This is obvious from her assertion that ‘we are workers’, ‘we do the same type of work’, ‘we are not animals’. By repeating this in different ways and contexts in her meetings, she ensured that even those who thought they were engaged in a ‘past-time’ activity started to consider the possibility that they in fact might be earning members of their families. Secondly, instead of lecturing them, she used the interactive approach, where she made her points and asked for feedback after every two or three lines: ‘Do you agree with me or not’, ‘Just tell me...’ and so on. This made her meetings participatory rather than a one-way speech. This helped the workers to conceptualize that ‘she is one of us’ rather than ‘above us’.

Thirdly and most importantly, Atmadevi was mindful of the fact that most of these women had migrated from the same place of origin, the same village; they belonged to the same caste, and in fact most of them were part of a large extended kinship group.<sup>10</sup> They looked out for each other in times of celebration and crisis. In this sense, the women were not just living in the same area, they had both family and neighbourly relations. For those who were earning less, she nudged their competitive side, inducing the doubt that they might never be comfortable with ‘her sister’ in another lane, because she was earning more than her. And for those that earned more than others, Atmadevi knocked on their ‘moral consciousness’, asking if they were genuinely comfortable knowing that their sisters in the next lane were paid less for the same work, and that

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<sup>10</sup> It was also found that most workers migrating from the same village and same caste to the different slums of Mumbai had the same surname. When they were asked if this was a coincidence, they said that all of them with the same surname were in fact related in some way or another, not just in that slum but also in other slums of Mumbai.

this situation would continue if they did not act. Their social capital built through overlapping networks of family, caste, place of origin and language was now in question.

Against this background, the workers had two options. If they chose not to fight back, they risked weakening their ties. On the other hand, if they chose to fight back, they could keep their social capital intact (or strengthen it) and perhaps have a shot at better wages, too (Putnam 1995). The workers chose the second option, and their victory in achieving a higher rate per piece than they had initially demanded meant that it was a win-win situation. They were now better paid than before, and their collective identity served to strengthen their family and kin ties. Furthermore, this action also proved to be beneficial for women from other communities and regional backgrounds residing in the same area and performing the same tasks.

Two years later, workers of the area continue to get equal remuneration for equal work, and cheerfully tell their story to anyone who wants to know. The mapping study conducted in other slum areas of Mumbai also brought to the attention of Atmadevi and other union leaders of LMKS that the situation there was similar to and in some cases worse than Dharavi.

Through the mapping study, while getting to know the home-workers in other areas of Mumbai, many workers were curious about us, too. They asked who we were, were we married, how many children did we have, what our organisation did, and so on. Through these questions, the identity of LMKS started to be established, as did our identity as trade unionists and researchers. By the third and fourth visits, workers especially from Amrut Nagar, were already curious to know if they could join this ‘union’ that did ‘nice things for workers like them’. In response, LMKS leaders did not waste time, and started their mobilizing efforts in Amrut Nagar. Despite the long distance between the two slums, LMKS leaders started to have meetings in the area, initially irregular, but later on a regular basis. The common issues affecting everyone (not just workers) – like water scarcity, access to subsidised food grains, cooking fuel and other supplies from the ration shops in Amrut Nagar – were some of the issues that the new members raised.

Presently, LEARN leaders are working to develop a structure of primary and secondary leadership within that area so that these and other issues can be handled collectively by the women within the area, with guidance from the LEARN Dharavi leadership. Secondly, the topics for interactions in new areas like Amrut Nagar include both specific work-related issues and non-work related ones. It may be pointed out that the trust-building that emerges from such casual interactions helps organizing efforts tremendously. These interactions include a host of topics such as gossip about mothers-in-law, requests for finding suitable brides or grooms for their children, family problems, stories from the village about similarities and differences, and so on.

It must be pointed out that the factors that strengthen social capital can also be exclusionary. For instance, the women who sat in a circle to work under the *peepul* tree in Amrut Nagar, could work better because these interactions served to break the monotony of the work itself. However, it was found that this particular group of workers came together by virtue of having migrated from the same place of origin, a village in Benaras, and belonged to the same caste. Two of these were part of a close-knit extended family. It is cliques of families and extended families that form these groups, based on all kinds of markers of identity. There is no doubt that these groups

serve to strengthen and build the social capital within the group, but they also serve to exclude those in the community who do not share the same identity. For instance, the entry to women of the same caste from another district of Uttar Pradesh or another state (such as Maharashtra) into this 'club' is not automatic or effortless. Similarly, stereotypical prejudices and ethnic tensions between people belonging to different regional, religious, caste and linguistic backgrounds often prevent such overlaps, even though both categories might be involved in performing the same tasks.

That said, it is noteworthy that the story of Atmadevi and her colleagues at LMKS in fact suggests the possibility of organizing illiterate and semi-literate workers from lower castes and classes from diverse backgrounds. When they first joined the union, they were exposed to a different aspect of their work and lives. Gradually, through discussions and training programmes, a critical narrative started to take shape in their minds, which was bolstered by rigorous exposure to an alternative paradigm of looking at labour, gender and community. This in turn gave way to shaping their identities as trade unionists, workers, women. As some LMKS leaders today say, over and above everything else, associating with the union gave them dignity, thus far denied at a number of levels. With proper training, awareness and trade-union education, the bottom-up approach to social change shows promise. The case of increase in wages quoted above also indicates it is possible to make changes in the existing supply chain, while the process of thinking of an alternative economic order continues worldwide.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This mapping exercise has brought to light the fact that women form an overwhelming majority of those involved in home-based work in Mumbai. As homemakers, these women perform all domestic chores and provide care for their families, and look after several expenses including education and healthcare. However, these efforts are neither recognized nor valued. This devaluation also extends to the remunerative work that they perform within the space of their homes. No matter which task, it tends to be extremely low-paid, with workers often incurring extra costs to perform them. Most workers talk of their activity as 'timepass', the colloquial Indian term referring to a pastime activity for 'killing time' or 'getting rid of boredom'.

Secondly, it was found that no mechanism exists to protect home-workers from the fluctuating demand and seasonality of available work. Without relief from the state in the form of, for instance, unemployment benefits, several home-workers double up as domestic workers temporarily. Reflecting on the trend among mill workers in Ahmedabad over the past two decades, Breman (2009: 35) observes that 'these people are competitors in a labour market in which the supply side is now structurally larger than the – constantly fluctuating– demand for labour power.' He also notes that the constant commotion and uncertainty does not make them 'vibrant' and 'ready to fight their way upward' as the World Bank and *Wall Street Journal* would have us believe, that in fact 'living in a state of constant emergency saps the energy to cope and erodes the strength to endure' (Breman 2009: 32).

Civic infrastructure such as water and sanitation amenities, healthcare and education facilities were found to be severely inadequate in both slums. It was only made worse by the congestion

and population density on a small landmass in both areas. In Amrut Nagar, the lack of civic infrastructure had a more profound impact. This is because the local elected representative had little say in several matters, while the internal division president (*vibhaag pramukh*) of local fascist Sons-of-the-Soil party was the prime decision maker in all aspects, including the distribution of resources such as water. Such local power dynamics have far-reaching impacts on the lives of people and, therefore, the work and life of the home based-workers. Further, the absence of any membership-based organization or NGO representing these concerns, especially the specific concerns of the workers, created a high dependency on the largesse of the local political heavyweight. If he chose to resolve or address one of the several issues of the residents of Amrut Nagar, it was understood as a big favour.

Occupational health hazards of home-work are many. Almost all the workers complained of severe upper and lower backaches, hand-aches and leg pain, and some specifically mentioned eye irritation and diminishing vision. Continuous standing or sitting positions are required and very few workers did not slouch. Regular health camps are a classic feature of LEARN, which provide some relief for these members in terms of preventive care. However, lobbying for state support in addressing health needs of home-workers and their families due to work-related issues (e.g. inhaling lint) or location-specific issues (e.g. home located next to an open gutter) is an agenda that LMKS and other home-worker organizations must take up.

In several slums of Dharavi, adolescent girls were found to have a large involvement in home-work. Barring a few, almost all children and adolescents involved in such work were found to be school-going or college-going. In Amrut Nagar, they assisted their mothers in home-work both directly and indirectly, in that, they carried water on their heads when the water supply started<sup>11</sup>. As far as Dharavi is concerned, there are hundreds of NGOs working for children, but not a single one represents their voice as workers. They seem to have no representation, either through child-rights groups or workers' unions.

All the observations made above point to the urgent need for organising efforts and further research directed at home-workers. We are not suggesting that organizing is a silver bullet that would make all the problems of home-workers disappear; however, it could be a powerful tool in activating local, regional, national and international instruments that could help in doing so. That said, from Atmadevi's efforts mentioned above, it is evident that the earnings and solidarity among Dharavi workers went up because the union took an initiative in changing the situation.

Since Amrut Nagar is a relatively new and uncharted territory for LMKS and organising efforts have just begun, the wages and working conditions are not as optimal as Dharavi where workers have been organized for a longer time. Innovative strategies need to be used to bring together workers from diverse backgrounds.

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<sup>11</sup> This refers to the start of the water supply. In Mumbai, water is supplied by the municipal corporation for two-five hours in all areas. The timings differ for each area. While in middle class and affluent areas, the timings are more or less fixed; in slums, there are hardly any fixed hours for the water supply. Therefore, in trying to manage household chores and home based work, home workers rely heavily on their children's help when the water finally comes to the community taps.

With the exception of the Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA), national federations of trade unions have largely ignored this large cohort of workers. In order to realize the ideals enshrined in the ILO Home Work Convention C177, 1996 (see Annexure 2 for contents of C177), it is important to begin by identifying workers through rigorous mapping exercises throughout India, followed by unionization efforts and the ratification of C177 by the Indian government. For several informal-sector unions organizing home-workers, this process could also provide a platform to share experiences and identify best practices and challenges, and to lobby for a national-level policy on home-workers to improve their lot.

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