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 Print

A woman's work...

At 5 am every day, Gayatri Kotri and her two sisters-in-law wake up and begin their chores - filling water at a tap near their one-room Dharavi home, cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, scrubbing vessels and getting five children ready for school.

By 7 am, the chores are done, Kotri's two brothers have set off for work and her five nieces and nephews are in school. Just in time, too.

Quickly, 40-year-old Kotri tucks her polio-shrivelled legs under her, distributes some papad dough between the three of them, and starts rolling out papads. Over the next 12 hours, the women will churn out 10 kg of papads, earning ₹ 300. "It's hard work. Our arms and backs ache. But we have no choice," says Kotri.

At 7 pm, the women will quickly cook dinner, then spend another two or three hours stitching sari blouses and petticoats by hand to supplement their earnings. "If we want to feed the children, we have to keep working," says Kotri.

Her two brothers have full-time jobs as sales executives with a local leather-trading company, but she has no idea what they earn. Like so many of the men in the slum, they are heavy drinkers and spend most of their money on alcohol.

For Kotri, it is a cycle that is all too familiar. Her mother rolled papads to support her family, with Kotri joining in at age 10, soon after she was pulled out of school.

Kotri's story is now part of an ongoing research project on women workers operating out of their homes, conducted by Mumbai-based NGO LEARN (Labour Education and Research Network) and partly funded by NGO HomeNet as part of a thesis led by PhD student Indira Gartenberg, 28, under the guidance of Sharit Bhowmik, founder of LEARN and professor of labour studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

"Despite working with LEARN for five years, I was surprised by the variety of products they make. Their working and living conditions are dismal," says Gartenberg. "Since I wanted my research to have an impact beyond the academic world, I have also canvassed for these women to join the LEARN women workers' union."

The Kotri women are among more than 1,500 who have signed up over the past six months from thousands of households surveyed across eight slums.

The second phase of the mapping project begins next month and continues until February. Here, Gartenberg and her LEARN team will focus on civic amenities such as sanitation, water supply and healthcare in the areas where these women work and live, mapping existing conditions and campaigning

for the government to improve them.

'I no longer cover my face with my pallu'

Bindu Rajgar, 30 - mother of three, married

Residence: Amrut Nagar slum, Ghatkopar; Employment: Making mangalsutra strings in a 225-sq-ft house shared with eight relatives Joined the LEARN union 5 months ago.

A Class 8 dropout, Rajgar came to Mumbai 14 years ago from Uttar Pradesh, after marrying a carpenter based in the city.

Her husband earns about ₹ 7,000 a month but suffers from tuberculosis and is a heavy drinker. To help support her family, Rajgar spends six hours a day twisting silk threads into twine for mangalsutras. She is paid R8 per dozen strings, earning ₹ 16 a day.

"It's not much," she says. "But it helps keep us going."

When research student Indira Gartenberg came to her door, Rajgar told her story and, in telling it, she says, realised that she played an important role in running her household.

"Earlier, I would comply with everything my husband said," says Rajgar. "But now I tell him that I too have the right to live my life."

Rajgar joined the union because the idea of uniting to fight social and financial problems appealed to her.

At the next union health camp, on October 24, Rajgar will take her husband for a TB consultation and will finally have her 13-year-old son's dislocated elbow set - eight years after he injured it in an accident. "We could never afford treatment," she says.

Rajgar is now urging other women in her slum to join the union, and plans to sign up for its sewing and computer classes so she can raise her skill levels and earn more for her family.

"Also, I no longer cover my face with my pallu," she says. "I just wear it over my head."

'I now feel like I have some support'

Manisha Kevat, 27 - mother of two, single

Residence: Rajiv Gandhi Nagar slum, Dharavi; Employment: Stitching women's clothes in her 200-sq-ft house Joined the LEARN union 1 month ago.

A Class 10 dropout from Uttar Pradesh, Kevat came to the city eight years ago, after marrying a Mumbai boy. She has been raising her two children alone since he left her for another woman five years ago.

Kevat works nine hours a day and earns about ₹ 4,000 a month, of which ₹ 3,000 goes in rent.

"Life is tough," she says. "I am always worrying about where the next meal will come from."

Kevat says she joined the union because she finds comfort in the employment schemes it offers. "I have nobody in this city," she says. "Now I feel like I have some help, some support."

Already, the union has helped enrol her elder daughter in a private school at a subsidised rate. At the next health camp, she will finally consult a doctor about her backaches and head-aches. "My eyes water when I stitch, but I've never seen a doctor about it," she says. "Now, I am looking forward to getting some relief."

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