

## Home-based Worker's Oral History



Lack of sunlight, fresh air, and water, and a big loan to pay back: Struggles of Mumbai's Ishravati

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Ishravati, 41 years, is a home-based jewelry-maker, and a mother of three girls.

Over the past 20 years, Ishravati has been making bead-necklaces. From 11 noon until 8 pm, she works at home for nine long hours performing this intricate task. She bears the cost of the necklace-thread. By obtaining the half-kilogram bag of beads directly from the factory, she avoids using intermediaries or middlemen. Each completed necklace earns her Re. 1, and each completed bunch makes Rs. 120 (1 bunch = 48 necklaces). She produces three bunches each day, earning around Rs. 360. She works six days a week and earns Rs. 2,160 a week.

The conditions at Ishravati's house are poor. She pawned her gold during the Covid-19 pandemic to take a loan of Rs. 40,000 and is now repaying it bit by bit. As a result of the factory closures caused by the lockdown, Ishravati and her husband both lost their sources of livelihood. They had to pay the extra fees associated with their children's online education. Around this time, Ishravati's health deteriorated and medical expenses increased. Due to the fear of COVID-19 virus, she was apprehensive about visiting the hospital. She somehow managed to get medicines from the municipal hospital and tried to recover at home.

*Ishravati says, "My home is in a poor shape. Our rent for this small house in Dharavi is around Rs.2000 per month. There is a drainage issue since there is no functional sewage system in the Dharavi slums, thus dirty water from the gutters enters our house and there is no way to prevent it. We have a cot so that we can sleep above the gutter water by elevating the cots higher off the ground. We are forced to drink contaminated drinking water because we have no other option. If we decide to fix the house, our landlord will want a sizable security deposit, for which we have no money. There is also no bathroom in the house. I have to pay Rs.500 for the electricity bill every month. As the public toilets were closed during the lockdown, we had to make other arrangements. The financial situation in the pandemic was horrible, so we felt forced to take a loan of Rs. 20,000 with 10% interest."*

In order to obtain Take-Home Ration kits from the neighbourhood ICDS centre, Ishravati received assistance from the LEARN Mahila Kamgar Sanghatana. This gave the impoverished family some food security. Soon after the lockdown was eased, she began receiving the jewellery work. Her husband, though, is still without a job. Ishravati laments her deteriorating vision since it interferes with her work, for example, she finds it difficult to thread the needle. Yet, as the sole income earner of the household now, she has no choice but to power through. Her kids assist her with this task when they get home from school. Ishravati says, *"I made an attempt to make my demands known to the local corporator to solve the sewage issue, but he paid no attention. Our neighbours do not support me with this cause so I face several challenges on a daily basis. When I sit outside my house and do the necklace work, I often dream of*

*working in a factory. This would help me to provide my children with higher education. Yet, my tuberculosis places restrictions on me."*

Urban home-based workers frequently experience extreme challenges due to housing and infrastructural issues. Ishravati's case highlights how urban infrastructure and housing concerns exacerbate all of these employment-related difficulties for urban informal workers. Several people who work from home toil seven days a week in huge slums that populate the cities. There is hardly any natural light or fresh air in these cramped dwellings. No individual sewage or freshwater connection, insufficient sanitation, and sometimes inadequate waste management systems are provided as part of the infrastructure.