

## Home-based Worker's Oral History



### Resilience of women workers: The story of Mumbai's Nirmala

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Nirmala, 50 years, is a home-based worker and a mother of two college-going children. Her husband works as a packer in a clothing factory, and earns Rs. 15,000 per month. Nirmala has

been making bead-bracelets for over 2 decades. It has caused her much eye pain and deteriorated vision.

The beads are provided to her by a Dharavi-based local contractor. One kilogram of this material is delivered to her home by the sub-contractor. She receives 30 paise per piece and earns around 40 rupees each day. Among other issues of low piece-rate, pathetic OSH conditions, and general dismal quality of civic amenities in her slum, she also complains about her high electricity costs which are now completely privatised in most of Mumbai's slums.

Nirmala had beads at her home when the COVID-19 shutdown was announced, but because the factory was closed, she was unable to deliver the completed orders. During this time, her husband was laid-off as well. Her son's COVID-19 infection made issues worse because she didn't have enough money. For the course of the treatment, they kept him in isolation in the loft of their house and obtained a loan for Rs. 15,000 at a 10% interest rate. Nirmala also received some support from her neighbours. Her son had to complete online schooling, so he had to sit outdoors. But if they went outside, the police would beat them up due to stringent lockdown rules.

Speaking about her experience, Nirmala says, *"I had to wear a veil the entire day because my father-in-law was also at home... I get sick if I sit still for too long. Due to my diabetes, my blood sugar can spike at any time. During the pandemic, it was extremely difficult for 1.5 years. I finished the orders using the supplies I had at home after the lockdown was lifted. They also compensated me Rs. 18,000 in past payments for work that I completed before the lockdown. I paid off all of our debt with the income I generated from home-based work."*

An unparalleled struggle has been witnessed among the urban women informal workers who live in urban slums of India. While studies are focusing on devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on women informal workers, only a few have focused on their extremely ingenious coping strategies, with no support from the government. Like many resilient women in slums, Nirmala too has demonstrated how one continues living in the face of dire challenges. This narrative primarily emphasises the brave steps that poor women take, in dealing with multiple unprecedented crises in order to ensure the survival and dignity of their family.