



SEWA BHARAT



INVISIBLE HANDS, UNHEARD VOICES

Stories of Home-Based Women Workers in India

August, 2025

Acknowledgement



This collection, *Invisible Hands, Unheard Voices: Stories of Home-Based Women Workers in India*, would not have been possible without the voices, trust, and courage of the women who shared their lived realities.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to:

The home-based women workers who opened their homes and hearts, speaking honestly about their struggles, resilience, and dreams. Your stories form the soul of this work.

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Introduction

Across India, millions of women earn their livelihoods from within the walls of their homes. These home-based workers (HBWs) sew garments, embroider sarees, make bangles, roll incense sticks, cut threads, paste stones, stitch bags, and produce countless other goods that quietly flow into local, national, and global markets.

In SEWA's perspective, home-based workers (HBWs) are women who earn their livelihood by producing goods or providing services from within or around their homes. Their homes are not just places of residence but also their workplaces. Whether they are stitching garments, rolling incense sticks, making bandhani designs, assembling electronic parts, or producing food items, their economic contribution remains hidden behind the four walls of the household.

For SEWA, the home as a workplace is both a space of opportunity and vulnerability. It allows women to combine paid work with unpaid care responsibilities, but it also means that their work remains invisible and unrecognized. Since their workplace overlaps with their home, they are excluded from most labor protections, workplace regulations, and social security schemes.

SEWA views HBWs as integral members of the workforce whose struggles reflect the broader issues of informality—low wages, lack of bargaining power, poor access to markets, absence of legal recognition, and multiple forms of violence in the world of work. Recognizing the home as a workplace is therefore central to SEWA's vision of securing visibility, rights, and dignity for HBWs.

The Challenges HBWs Face

The stories in this collection reveal the multi-layered struggles of women HBWs:

- ▣ **Economic exploitation** – Extremely low piece rates, wage theft, delayed payments, and the constant threat of losing work if they speak up.
- ▣ **Poor and unsafe working conditions** – Cramped, poorly lit spaces; no protective gear; high exposure to dust, chemicals, and sharp tools.
- ▣ **Lack of social protection** – No paid leave, health insurance, pensions, or maternity benefits.
- ▣ **Power imbalances** – Dependence on contractors or middlemen who control work supply and rates, leaving women with no bargaining power.
- ▣ **Double burden of work** – Managing unpaid care work alongside paid production, often at the cost of their own health and well-being.
- ▣ **Gender-based violence** – This includes domestic violence, which often spills over into women's working lives, limiting their mobility, earnings, and independence; sexual harassment by contractors, suppliers, and even within their communities; and structural and economic violence that undermines their dignity and safety.

Framing Through ILO Convention 190

In 2019, the International Labour Organization adopted Convention 190 (C-190)—the first global treaty to affirm that everyone has the right to a world of work free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence.

Defining the “World of Work”

C-190 broadens the meaning of “world of work” far beyond formal offices and factories. It includes:

- ▣ Homes used as workplaces, where HBWs spend long hours producing goods.
- ▣ Public and private spaces linked to work, such as streets and markets where workers commute, sell, or deliver goods.
- ▣ Interactions with contractors, suppliers, or middlemen who control access to work and wages.
- ▣ Work-related communications, meetings, and events that shape conditions of labour.

This framing acknowledges that violence is not limited to physical abuse. It can be:

- ▣ **Economic violence** – wage theft, unfair payments, exploitative piece rates.
- ▣ **Structural violence** – unsafe housing, lack of protective equipment, health risks from dust, chemicals, or poor infrastructure.
- ▣ **Domestic violence** – when abuse at home restricts women’s mobility, independence, and capacity to work.
- ▣ **Sexual harassment** – threats, coercion, and unsafe interactions with contractors or within the community.

Why C-190 Matters for HBWs ?

For home-based workers, C-190 is transformative because:

- ▣ **Recognition** – It acknowledges that homes are also workplaces and that HBWs are workers deserving of dignity, rights, and protection.

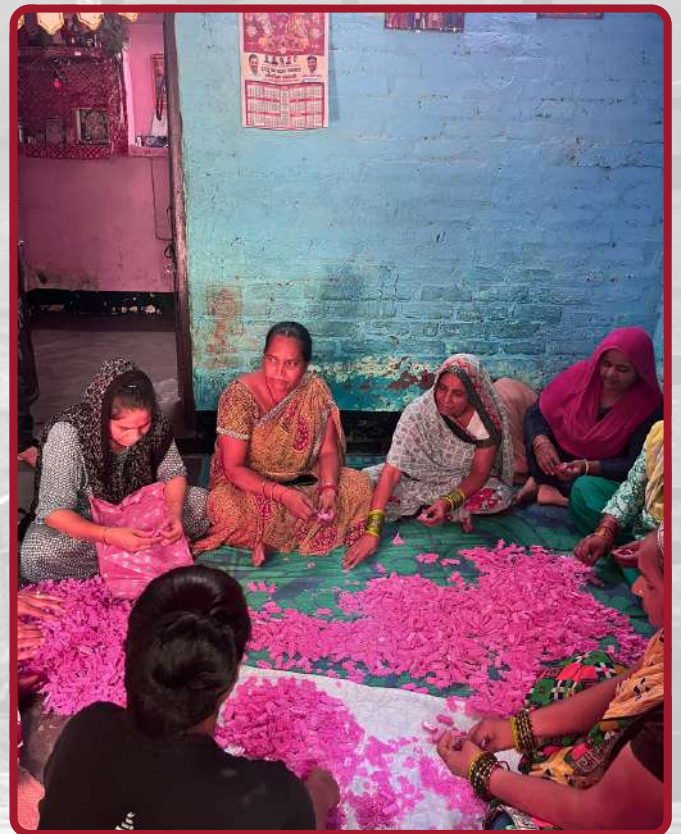
- ▣ **Visibility** – It makes the invisible violence that HBWs face—low wages, unsafe workspaces, harassment—part of the global conversation on labour rights.

- ▣ **Accountability** – It urges governments and employers to extend labour protections, grievance redressal, and social security to informal and home-based workers.

- ▣ **Empowerment** – It provides a legal and moral framework that strengthens SEWA’s organising efforts, allowing HBWs to demand justice not just in factories or offices, but in the full spectrum of their working lives.

Purpose of This Collection

Invisible Hands, Unheard Voices documents real stories of home-based women workers from Delhi and Jaipur. Through their own words, we see the daily realities behind the products they make: the exploitation they endure, the resilience they embody, and the collective strength they build when they organise. By placing these narratives within the framework of C-190, this publication calls for recognising and addressing all forms of violence—whether economic, structural, domestic, or sexual—occurring in the world of work, whether in factories, markets, streets, or inside the home.



Section I

Struggles in Silence

Stories of Silence and Injustice



The Story of Women HBWs

New Ashok Nagar, Delhi

In New Ashok Nagar, many women work as **home-based workers (HBWs)** to support their families. One group of women in **E-block** was doing thread-cutting work on clothes. For every piece, they earned just **75 paise**. A contractor had taken a rented space nearby and used it as a small factory to give them this work on a *piece-rate* basis.

At first, things looked good. The women were hopeful this work would help them earn a little income and manage their homes. They worked diligently for three months. **However**, after all their hard efforts, the contractor suddenly stopped paying them. Before they could demand their pending wages, he shifted his factory to a new location without informing anyone. He owed each woman **₹1,000 and ₹2,000**, leaving the entire lane of women workers affected.

The women tried calling him repeatedly, but he either did not answer or blocked their numbers. A few visited the new factory, but he refused to meet them or discuss their unpaid wages. They felt **cheated, powerless, and disrespected**.

SEWA Delhi's Support and the Women's Dilemma

Kusha, a *karyakarta* from SEWA Delhi, tried to help. She contacted the contractor and spoke to the women about the power of unity. She encouraged them to take collective action and demand their unpaid wages.

Initially, the women were ready to fight for what was rightfully theirs. **Later**, many hesitated, saying the amount was too small to risk future work opportunities. Families advised them to remain quiet, fearing that contractors might blacklist them if they spoke out.

They were caught in a difficult position: stand up for justice or remain silent to survive.

This case clearly shows how informal women workers are vulnerable to **exploitation and economic violence**, especially when there is **no legal protection, written contract, or support system** in place.

Falling Wages and Fear

Shiv Vihar, Delhi



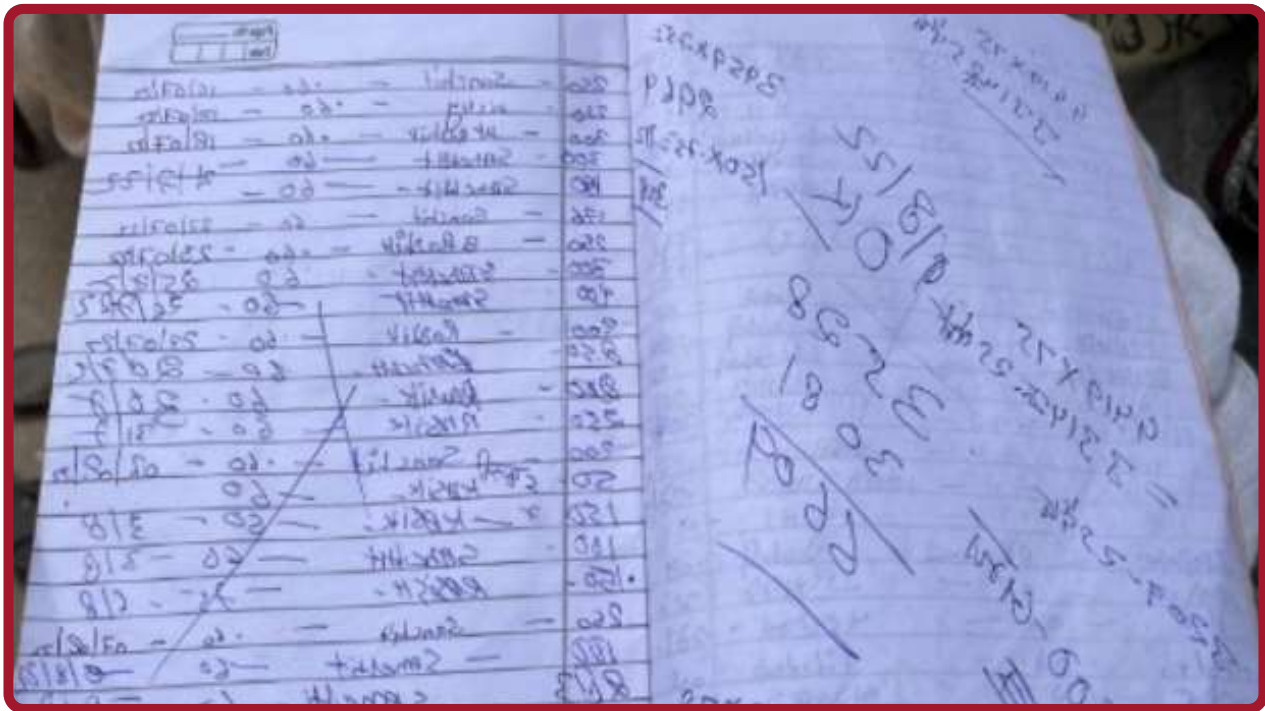
In the **Shiv Vihar** area of **Mustafabad** (Delhi), many women earn a living by doing home-based tassel work—attaching tassels to *dupattas* and scarves. It is a skilled and detailed task, done patiently by hand.

Radha, 34 years old, shared that ten years ago they were paid **₹1** per scarf. Over the years, this amount has dropped—**75 paise** a year ago, and now just **50 paise** per scarf.

Despite the rising cost of living, their wages have gone down, not up. For women who rely on this income to feed their families, this wage degradation has had a serious impact on their daily lives, dignity, and well-being.

Irregular and Unfair Payment System

Radha also shared how contractors delay payments or only give small amounts when the women urgently need money. They are not paid regularly and, in many cases, receive full payments only during festivals or special occasions..



To keep track of their work and earnings, many HBWs maintain diaries to record how many scarves they've done and how much money is due. But even with proof of their work, they have no guarantee that they will be paid on time—or at all.

Fear of Speaking Up

When some women tried to ask for better wages, the contractor refused. He even threatened to stop giving them work if they continued to raise their voices. This creates a situation where women are forced to stay silent, even though they know they are being underpaid.

One HBW said, “If we had an office or workplace of our own, we could speak up. But working from home, we feel invisible. The contractor can easily replace us with other women who will accept low wages.” This statement reflects the power imbalance and fear of losing work, which keeps women from demanding their rights.

ILO Convention No. 190 (C-190) talks about violence and harassment in the world of work—not just physical abuse, but also economic violence, exploitation, and fear-based control.

Sarita – A Home-based worker

Shiv Vihar, Delhi

Sarita is a 25-year-old woman living in a small, dark, and overcrowded one-room home in the **Shiv Vihar area of Mustafabad**. This single room serves every purpose of her life — she cooks there, works there, and sleeps there with her children. There is no natural light in the room, forcing her to rely on artificial lighting throughout the day, which increases her electricity costs and adds to her financial burden. She works making *lifafas* (newspaper packets) and earns just ₹8 per kilogram. Every day, she tries to complete five kilograms of work, which means earning around ₹40 a day. Her work is dependent on a contractor who supplies her with the newspapers, and she has no control over the volume of work or the payment rates. Her husband is a labourer and earns a minimal amount of money.



The story of Sarita shows invisible labour and a double burden: like many women in informal work, Sarita is managing two full-time jobs—one as a worker and another as a caregiver—without recognition or support for either. The constant stress, poor pay, lack of rest, and absence of basic work protections that women like Sarita face every day amount to a denial of dignity, safety, and fairness at work.



Despite the long hours and low income, Sarita continues her work to support her family. She is also a mother of two young children—one of whom is still breastfeeding. While she works hard to meet the deadlines, she also ensures her baby gets the care and nourishment he needs. Often, Sarita is so caught up in work and childcare that she skips her own meals. The burden of unpaid care work, coupled with low-paid home-based work, leaves her with no time for herself—no rest, no breaks, and no self-care.

Yashoda, Home-Based Sock Packer

Sunder Nagari, Delhi

Yashoda, a 57-year-old home-based worker from **Sunder Nagari**, has been engaged in the work of packing socks for many years. She is paid between **₹8–₹13** for packing 144 pairs (1 gross) of socks, depending on the style. Despite her long-standing experience and commitment to her work, she earns only a minimal income.

Yashoda lives in a narrow, congested street where very little natural light enters her home. To work efficiently, she relies on electric lighting during the day, which significantly increases her electricity. Although she consumes less than 200 units— which should ideally be covered under Delhi’s electricity subsidy – her landlord charges her **₹8** per unit, leaving her with monthly bills she struggles to pay.



The tools used in her work—especially the machine for attaching stickers—pose a daily risk. It contains a large needle, and during the packing process, there are frequent accidents where her fingers get pricked. These physical injuries, though minor, are recurring and show how **even low-paid home-based work carries invisible physical risks** that are often ignored in formal labour safety discussions.

Emotional Burden and Violence Beyond Work

Yashoda’s distress is not limited to her working conditions. Her youngest son has become involved in substance abuse, and illegal drug activity is prevalent in her area. She is deeply worried about him but feels powerless due to the **lack of accessible and affordable rehabilitation support** for low-income families.

She says, “I have spent my whole life working hard so my children could live better. Now, watching my son fall into this trap is unbearable.” Her voice reflects not just personal grief but also the **emotional violence many women face silently**—where unsafe surroundings, inadequate services, and lack of state response leave them to cope alone.

Sumitra – Elderly strainers worker

Sunder Nagari, Delhi



At the age of 62, Sumitra (name changed), a home-based worker, continues to contribute to her household economy by making strainers—painstakingly pasting nets onto rings. For each kilogram of strainers completed, she receives only ₹5, a meager wage that starkly reflects the undervaluation of informal labour, particularly done by elderly women. Her husband assists her in this work, and together, they depend on this small income to cover essential expenses, including medical costs.

Despite her age and long years of labour, Sumitra receives no formal recognition or social protection. Her two sons, though married and living separately, are not part of her financial safety net. She shared that this work not only helps them remain occupied but also provides some **dignity and financial independence** in old age.



An ILO C-190 Perspective

ILO Convention 190 recognizes that violence and harassment in the world of work are not limited to formal employment settings. It emphasises that such harms can be rooted in structural conditions of informality, including economic insecurity, lack of protection, and power imbalances.

Sunitra's situation reflects multiple dimensions of invisible violence:

▣ **Economic exploitation:** Receiving only ₹5 per kilogram of strainers, represents a form of structural violence—where women like HBWs are forced to accept low-paying, piece-rate work with no negotiation power.

▣ **Age-based vulnerability:** At 62, she continues to work without any access to pension, health insurance, or social security—rights that C-190 implies must be considered under broader understandings of worker safety and dignity.

▣ **Gendered burden:** As an elderly woman, She is expected to continue contributing to the household economy, even when health issues exist—this expectation reflects the unrecognized burden that older women in informal work carry.

Jahangirpuri, Delhi

In Jahangirpuri, 23-year-old **Munni**, a young home-based worker (HBW), lives a life filled with pain, fear, and control. She has two small children and works from home pasting stones on bangles—a trade she shares with her husband. But despite working long hours, **all the earnings go to her husband**, who tightly controls every part of her life.

The materials come from a contractor, but it is her husband who brings them home, deals with the contractor, and collects the payment. **Munni only does the work**—quietly, for long hours—but **she has no idea about the piece rate**, how much her labour is worth, or what is being paid for the work she completes.

He doesn't allow her to step out of the house. He doesn't give her any money for household expenses. Even the ration items he brings are sometimes not enough to feed the family. While Munni works hard, she and her two boys often go to bed hungry.

To make matters worse, her husband is addicted to gambling and has taken on heavy debts. Every day, Munni faces **physical abuse and emotional torture**. The violence is constant, and she lives in fear. She wants to leave and protect her children—but she feels completely stuck.

She has **no support from her maternal family**, and the couple lives in a small, one-room rented home in Jahangirpuri. With no money of her own, Munni feels she has **no way out**.

Some of the other women in her trade group noticed her pain. They reached out and told her they were ready to help.

But Munni was scared. She feared that if she spoke up, the violence would get even worse. Still, the woman told her clearly: *“Unless you speak, nothing will change—but we are with you. You are not alone.”*

This case shows how **work and personal life are deeply connected**, especially for women who **work from home**.

Living & Working in Dust: The Silbatta Makers

Nand Nagari, Delhi

Nand Nagari's E Block, a group of hardworking women home-based workers, who have been making *silbattas* (traditional stone grinders) for many years. This work is not new to them. Their **entire families—men, women, even children—are involved**, and this craft has been passed down through generations.

They buy **large stones from Jaipur, Rajasthan**, for about **₹150 per stone**. From one stone, they usually make **2–3 silbattas**, which they sell in the local market for **₹70–₹80 each**. To earn a bit more, they sometimes travel to **Punjab** to sell their products. Most of the families doing this work are **migrants from Uttar Pradesh** and have been living in Nand Nagari for a long time.

But times have changed. With the arrival of **modern electric grinders**, the demand for silbattas has dropped. Now, these families struggle to earn enough to meet their basic needs.

Hidden Struggles and Everyday Risks

While the work is traditional, it's **not safe**. Making *silbattas* involves cutting and shaping heavy stones, which creates **a lot of dust**. The women shared how this **stone dust gets into their lungs**, making it **hard to breathe**. One HBW shared a heartbreaking story: her **young daughter passed away** from a lung infection caused by long-term exposure to stone dust.

Their **eyes also burn** because of the dust, and many have **cuts and injuries** from the tools they use. But they continue working because they have no other source of income.

Apart from the health risks, the women also face difficulties in their daily lives. For example, there is **no toilet facility in their block**, so they had to **pay ₹5 each time** they used the nearby public washrooms. For families already earning so little, this small amount added up and made life even harder.



Thankfully, with **SEWA Delhi's support**, the women now **get free access to public washrooms**. This has made a big difference in their daily lives.

The HBWs of Nand Nagari Face

- ❑ **Occupational health hazards** like respiratory illness, eye damage, and physical injuries.
- ❑ **No protective gear**, no medical coverage, and no legal safeguards.
- ❑ **Economic insecurity** due to falling demand and no alternative livelihood options.
- ❑ **Inadequate sanitation**, forcing them to spend from already low incomes for basic needs.

Their study is a clear example of **invisible violence**—where **structural neglect** and **lack of protections** put their lives and health at risk every single day.

Living and Working in Narrow Spaces: Challenges Faced by Women Home-Based Workers in Delhi

In many areas of Delhi where home-based workers (HBWs) live—such as Bhalswa, Jahangirpuri, Nand Nagari, and similar densely populated neighborhoods—the **lanes are narrow**, and **houses are tightly packed**. These cramped spaces receive **very little natural light**, leaving residents, especially women who work from home, heavily **dependent on artificial lighting** throughout the day.

These physical living conditions, combined with informal and unprotected work arrangements, deeply affect the well-being, health, and productivity of home-based workers—most of whom are women.

Key Challenges and How They Impact HBWs

■ **Lack of Natural Light and Increased Electricity Costs:** Many HBWs work in poorly lit rooms, which forces them to use electric lights even during the daytime. This increases electricity bills, which is a major burden for women already earning very low wages. Under C-190, this can be seen as economic pressure created by poor infrastructure, limiting their ability to work in fair and safe conditions.

■ **Long Working Hours and Physical Strain:** To meet deadlines and increase their earnings, HBWs often work for long hours without rest. Over time, this leads to backaches, neck pain, and general physical discomfort. This form of invisible violence—where the structure of work pushes women to compromise their health—falls under the broader definition of workplace violence in C-190.

■ **Eye Strain and Vision Problems:** Many tasks—like embroidery, stitching, sticking stones, or fine handwork—require high levels of concentration. In dim lighting, these tasks become even more difficult and can result in eye strain, headaches, and deteriorating eyesight. The absence of proper lighting setups or visual aids is yet another way these workers are exposed to unsafe working conditions.

■ **Lack of Safety Equipment:** Women who work with sharp tools, machines, or chemicals often do so without any protective gear. The risk of cuts, burns, or long-term health issues is high. Despite these dangers, they lack access to safety training, first aid, or even awareness of their right to work in safe conditions. This is a direct violation of the principles of C-190, which promotes a safe and healthy work environment for all workers—including those in the informal economy.

Harassment While Working from Home

Rajiv Nagari, Delhi

Radha, a 21-year-old young woman from Bihar, has been helping her mother, **Saraswati**, make flags for the past 6 years. Both are home-based workers. For making 1,000 flags, they are paid only ₹25—a very low amount for the effort and time it takes.

Radha loves dancing. One day, while taking a break from work, she danced near the open gate of their house. Coincidentally, the contractor who gave them flag work passed by. He saw Radha dancing, recorded a video without her consent, and later sent it to her with a message: *"You dance well. I'll show this to your brother."*

This message was not a compliment. Radha was terrified. In our social context, such a threat can lead to serious consequences for a girl—family conflict, shame, restrictions, and even loss of freedom. That's exactly what happened. After receiving the message, Radha had a serious argument at home. Her mother, Saraswati, was deeply worried.

Radha confided in **Sudha**, an *Agewan* (community leader). Sudha immediately confronted the contractor. She told him clearly that what he did was wrong—recording a woman without permission and using it to threaten her is **violence**. She warned him that if he didn't delete the video, she would report him to the police.

Initially, the contractor refused, but Sudha stood her ground. She reminded him that this kind of behavior is punishable and that women workers have support now. Under pressure, the contractor finally deleted the video.

Even though the situation was resolved, the damage was already done. Saraswati was so disturbed by the harassment and fear for her daughter's safety that she left the work altogether and moved away with her family.

Stone Pricking Home-Based Worker

Raamganj, Jaipur

Shafida, a 35-year-old woman from **Raamganj** in **Jaipur**, has been working as a home-based worker doing the work of stone pricking. She does this work in her free time to support her family's income. Her work involves piercing both small and large stones, a work that demands precision and patience. For every 100 small stones, she earns around ₹30–₹40, and for 100 large stones, she receives ₹50–₹60. On average, she pricks about 500 stones a day.

Although this sounds like a lot, her daily earnings are very low compared to the effort and risk involved. That means she earns barely ₹150–₹250 per day — and only if the contractor gives her work regularly. Still, Shafida continues the work because it's one of the few options available to her. She shared that payment is flexible —if she wants to be paid daily or monthly, the contractor



agrees. However, all records of her work are maintained by the contractor, not by her. This creates a power imbalance, where she has no written proof or control over her work history, earnings, or future.

Shafida also invested ₹4,000 from her own savings to buy an old stone piercing machine from someone she knew. The contractor did not help her buy this. A new machine would cost ₹10,000, but she cannot afford it. She said, *“We only get the raw stones from the contractor. Everything else is our own headache.”* This shows how home-based women workers often bear the cost of

production without any support from employers or middlemen.

The **work is painful and risky**. Holding small stones tightly between her fingers and using the needle to pierce them often results in **injuries**. Sometimes, the needle **pricks her own fingers**, leaving deep marks and swelling. Despite this, she has **never visited a doctor** or taken a tetanus shot. When injured, she simply **squeezes out some blood and continues working**.



This shows how **occupational health and safety (OSH)** is missing

from her work, which violates the right to a safe and healthy work environment for all workers.

She learned this work from her husband, who used to do it before he met with an accident and became bedridden. Now, Shafida is the sole earner for her family. She has three children, including one who is on the autism spectrum and requires extra care. She also cares for her elderly mother-in-law, alongside her husband. Despite the challenges, Shafida continues her work with great strength and patience.

Aari Work by Women Home-Based Worker

Raamganj, Jaipur

A group of young girls (they are from the same family) home-based workers who do Aari Tari work—a traditional form of embroidery on sarees. These girls are highly skilled who decorate sarees with beautiful thread designs, stones, and fabric patches. But behind this beautiful art lies a story of struggle, unfair working conditions, and invisible forms of violence.

They get sarees from a contractor. They also have to spend their own money to buy the materials like stones, threads, and design patches. The contractor only

provides the saree cloth. This means that even before they earn anything, they are already investing their own money.

They do this detailed and eye-straining work inside a small room, which also acts as their workplace. For this, they have to set up proper lighting to even see the tiny stitches and delicate designs. But they pay the electricity bills themselves. They installed three tube lights just so that they can work properly, but no one supports them for these extra costs.

These women live in a **narrow and unhygienic gali** (lane). The lack of cleanliness and basic sanitation in their neighborhood affects their **health** and overall well-being. They work for long hours in these surroundings, which are



not safe or healthy.

This environment, while not physically violent in a traditional sense, reflects what C-190 describes as **structural violence**—where the systems and conditions around work are so poor that they harm a worker’s dignity, safety, and health.



They paid **₹200 per saree**, and the contractor decides the rate depending on the amount of design or detailing to be done. But this rate does **not reflect the amount of hard work, skill, and time** the women put in.

Sometimes the work is extremely detailed and takes hours, yet the payment remains the same.

They keep a **diary to record the sarees completed**, and they receive their money either weekly or monthly, depending on their preference. But there’s **no transparency** on how the final rates are fixed. They are at the mercy of the contractor’s decision.

Unseen Burden

The responsibility to maintain their own workspace, bear all utility costs, and

manage household duties alongside work adds to the emotional and mental pressure. The women don't have any say in deciding their working hours, workload, or wages.

This too fits under the broader understanding of violence in the world of work that C-190 talks about — especially for informal women workers whose homes are their workplaces.

Wage Theft and Struggle for Dignity in Work

Bandha Basti, Jaipur

Sayra has been living on a small hill in *Bandha Basti* for over three decades. She was married at the age of 13 and became a mother just a year later. For the past 15 years, she has been supporting her family by making lac bangles from home. Her husband is a rickshaw puller, and with six children to raise and educate, Sayra's income is crucial for the family's survival.

Sayra is a home-based worker, without contracts, job security, or benefits, and often face exploitation and unfair treatment. These workers are largely invisible in formal systems, even though they contribute significantly to local markets and traditional crafts.

For three years, Sayra was receiving regular bangle-making work from a contractor. She completed her work on time, and in return, he used to pay her. But six months ago, the contractor—who was from Bihar but working in Jaipur—suddenly stopped paying her.

He kept saying “next week” every time she asked for her money. Slowly, weeks turned into months, and he eventually **disappeared** without paying her anything. He owes Sayra **₹10,000**, and his phone has been switched off ever since. She has no way to reach him.

This is a clear case of **wage theft**, where a worker is denied their right to be paid for their labour. Under **ILO Convention 190**, this is seen as a form of **economic violence**—because it causes harm, distress, and affects a worker's ability to live a life with dignity.

The unpaid wages hit Sayra very hard. She couldn't buy raw materials to continue her bangle work. The stress of losing her hard-earned money affected her health. Most painful of all, she couldn't pay her children's school fees, and they had to **drop out of school**. Her role as a mother and a worker was deeply

shaken, all because someone misused their power and disappeared without fulfilling their responsibility.

A **SEWA Jaipur organiser**, who had received training on understanding violence at work, visited Sayra's neighborhood. In a community meeting, Sayra shared her story. The organiser was moved by her situation and decided to act.

She **accompanied Sayra to her children's school**, spoke with the principal, and helped get the children **re-admitted**, even though their fees hadn't been paid. This small but powerful act of solidarity shows how **community support can restore dignity**.

During these meetings, other women also came forward. It turned out that **10 more women** in the same area had worked for the same contractor—and **none of them were paid**. Together, they had lost nearly **₹50,000**.

SEWA tried to contact the contractor, but there was no response. However, this incident sparked awareness in the community about the **need to protect their rights** as workers.

SEWA is now helping these women explore ways to hold contractors accountable and demand justice. They are also working on raising awareness that wage theft is not just a financial issue—it's a form of violence that must be addressed.

Section II

Voices of Change

Positive / Collective Action Stories



Standing Together for Justice

Mustafabad, Delhi

Uzma (30) and Shehnaaz (32) are both home-based workers living in the narrow lanes of **Mustafabad**. Their daily work involves doing turpayi (thread work) on small and big purses. For every small purse, they are paid just ₹3, and for a big purse, only ₹5. Despite this low wage, they keep working to support their families.

In one of the community trade group meetings organised by *Agewan* (local leader) Parveena in their *mohalla*, where she discussed about the trade related issues and how violence at work is connected to them, Uzma and Shehnaaz gathered the courage to speak up. They shared how their contractor had not paid them for their hard work. This delay in payment was creating tension at home, making it hard to manage household expenses.

What made things worse was that this was not just happening to them—other women in the meeting also shared similar experiences

Parveena listened carefully. She didn't just sympathise—she took action. She brought the issue to an organiser with SEWA Delhi. Organiser encouraged Parveena to approach the contractor directly, especially since he was also from the same locality. With support and confidence from the SEWA Delhi team, Parveena decided to do just that.

She contacted the contractor and told him clearly that these workers were waiting for their rightful wages. At first, the contractor gave excuses. But Parveena didn't give up. As advised by Sarita, she followed up consistently, reminding him that the women were not alone. Each visit, each call, sent a strong message—that the community was standing together.

Finally, after weeks of follow-up, the contractor agreed to pay the pending dues. Uzma and Shehnaaz received ₹2,000. It was not just about the payment

—it was about being heard, being respected, and knowing they had the power to demand fairness.

This story is a reminder of how many home-based women workers face injustice quietly because they feel isolated and powerless. But when they come together, supported by strong local leaders and organisations like SEWA, change is possible.

Bindi makers' Payment Win

Nand Nagari, Delhi

In Nandnagri's E2 area, a group of 15 women home-based workers (HBWs) were facing issues with non-payment for their work. These women, who earn their livelihood by making *bindis*, were worried and frustrated. For the last three months, they had not received any payment from the contractor who gave them the work. For making 144 *bindi* packets women gets ₹10-₹13 rupees according to the design.

During a trade group meeting organised by **Anju**, an active *Agewan* (community leader), the issue came to light. One of the HBWs, Renu, shared her personal experience. She had been making *bindis* for four to five years. This was not the first time she had faced such a situation. Before this contractor, she and several other women had worked with another person who also did not pay them for two full months—and then disappeared. Now, with a new contractor, they were facing the same problem again.

The women were stuck in a dilemma. They feared that if they stopped working, they would lose any chance of getting their pending payments. But if they continued, they were not sure whether they would ever be paid. The uncertainty was affecting their household budgets and mental peace.

During the meeting, Anju encouraged the group to take collective action. She asked them to directly approach the contractor and demand what was rightfully theirs. Some women were hesitant, fearing the contractor might retaliate by refusing to pay them altogether or by stopping the work supply. But a few brave women, encouraged by each other and supported by Anju, decided to take the step.

They met the contractor together and firmly explained the problem. Their courage paid off—the contractor agreed to pay them. This small victory gave the rest of the group the strength to do the same. One by one, the other women

also approached the contractor. Eventually, all the women received the pending payments for their hard work.

Rajiv Nagar Rakhi Trade Group

Rajiv Nagar, Delhi

In Rajiv Nagar, a group of women home-based workers (HBWs) who make rakhis were struggling with extremely low wages for their labour-intensive work. For years, these women were being paid just **₹15 for making 144 rakhis** — a rate that hadn't changed since before the COVID-19 pandemic, despite rising costs of living and inflation.

This rakhi-making work takes place over a long season — **from December to August** — but the **payment is given only at the end, in August**. If any woman needed money earlier, she had to ask the contractor for an advance. This meant they were often working for months with no steady income, relying on the hope that the contractor would eventually pay them.

The issue came to light during a trade group meeting organised by **Shalini**, an **Agewan (community leader)** who regularly meets with the women to discuss their challenges and support them in organizing. The women shared their frustration and helplessness over the stagnant wage. They felt their hard work wasn't being valued.

In May 2024, encouraged by Shalini, the women decided it was time to act. They came together, **organised themselves as a united group**, and went to **negotiate directly with the contractor**. Backed by Shalini's guidance and support, they **collectively demanded a fairer price** for their work.

Their collective action worked — the contractor **agreed to raise the wage from ₹15 to ₹18 per 144 rakhis**. This **₹3** increase might seem small, but for the women, it was a **hard-won and meaningful victory**. More importantly, it set a precedent: the increase not only benefited the women in this particular group but was extended to **all women engaged in rakhi work under the same contractor**.

Ongoing Efforts

Shalini shared that the work is not over. In fact, this success has motivated the group to aim even higher. **This year, they are determined to push the rate to ₹20.** Shalini is working closely with the women to build their confidence, strengthen their collective voice, and prepare for the next round of negotiations.

Chand SEWA Swayam Sahayata Samuh

Shastri Nagar, Jaipur

Chand SEWA Swayam Sahayata Samuh is a group of home-based women workers from **JP Colony, Shastri Nagar, Jaipur**. These women had been struggling with irregular work and very low wages. During one of the meetings, the women shared their concerns. They explained how they used to stitch export garments like night suits, earning just ₹8 per suit and even then, their payments were often delayed.

Anu, an *Agewan* (a local leader), raised these issues with the SEWA Jaipur team. SEWA then connected with the Desire Foundation, an organisation that had received a government order (under the NULM scheme) to get jute bags stitched. The Desire Foundation wanted to give this work to women from self-help groups (SHGs).

However, there was a challenge—most of the women only had hand-stitching machines, but this work needed motor stitching machines. As a result, only five women could take up the work in the beginning.

To test the quality of work, Desire Foundation gave them a trial order of four cloth bags. The SHG passed this trial and then received an order of 100 cloth bags. They were paid ₹5 per bag.

While doing this work, some women began to suffer from hand and palm allergies due to the chemicals in the fabric. They informed Anu about the issue. She spoke to **Yogesh ji**, who then contacted the contractor. Yogesh ji requested that the chemicals be reduced and also asked for a higher piece-rate to support the women. The contractor agreed to increase the rate by ₹1 per bag—so now, the women earned ₹6 per bag.

Since then, the women have been earning between ₹60 to ₹100 per day. However, they faced another difficulty during the summer. Most of them live

in *kutcha* (temporary) houses with tin roofs, and due to the intense heat wave, they found it extremely difficult to work inside their homes.

Once again, Anu stepped in. She advised the women to stay hydrated and take care of their health by drinking buttermilk and lemonade. She also suggested they cover their rooftops with thick cloth sacks to block direct sunlight.

Later, some women started experiencing eye strain and vision issues due to long hours of stitching. In response, SEWA Rajasthan organised eye check-up camps in the community. Women who needed glasses received them at a 30% discount.

Today, these women HBWs are not just earning a steady income but also creating a supportive and safe working environment for each other, with the help of SEWA's guidance.

This success story proves that with community support, awareness, and organised action, even deeply rooted workplace injustices faced by informal women workers can be addressed.

The Way Forward

Invisible Hands, Unheard Voices documents real stories of home-based women workers from Delhi and Jaipur. Through their own words, we see the daily realities behind the products they make: the exploitation they endure, the resilience they embody, and the collective strength they build when they organise. By placing these narratives within the framework of C-190, this publication calls for recognising and addressing all forms of violence—whether economic, structural, domestic, or sexual—occurring in the world of work, whether in factories, markets, streets, or inside the home.

SEWA's Call to Action

At SEWA Bharat, we believe that when women come together, they change not only their own lives but also the systems around them. The next step is clear:

- **Organise** – Bring HBWs into strong, democratic collectives.
- **Recognize** – Demand legal acknowledgment of their work and contributions.
- **Protect** – Secure safe working conditions, fair pay, and social security for all HBWs.
- **Amplify** – Continue telling these stories until they can no longer be ignored

We call on policymakers, industry leaders, civil society, and the public to stand with HBWs. The change begins when invisible hands are no longer unheard voices—but recognized, respected, and empowered.



SEWA BHARAT

ABOUT THE ORGANISATION

SEWA Bharat is an organisation dedicated to the empowerment of women in India, particularly those working in the informal sector. SEWA Bharat operates with the mission to improve the livelihoods and working conditions of self-employed women, who often face significant challenges such as lack of job security, social protection, and access to financial services. The organization provides support through various initiatives, including capacity building, access to microfinance, health care, and legal aid. SEWA Bharat also advocates for policy changes that favor women's rights and economic empowerment, aiming to create a more equitable society.

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