

WOMEN AT WORK

HOW A DOMESTIC WORKERS' COLLECTIVE IN ASSAM IS PIONEERING EFFORTS FOR RIGHTS AND RECOGNITION



SUGGESTED CITATION:

Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA). (2023). Women at Work: How a Domestic Workers' Collective in Assam is Pioneering Efforts for Rights and Recognition. Mumbai: India.

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PUBLISHED BY:

Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA)
YUVA Centre, Plot 23, Sector 7, Kharghar,
Navi Mumbai – 410210 (India)
2023

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ABSTRACT

Within India's north-eastern state of Assam, domestic workers' rights remain unrecognised. No law recognises them as workers. Not even a social protection scheme has come into effect, despite the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act of 2008 mandating this. In the context of the state's contentious Citizen Amendment Bill, domestic workers are further marginalised.

Within these challenging circumstances, this case study documents how a domestic workers' collective—Grihokarmi Adhikar Suraksha Samiti (GASS)—across select settlements of Guwahati and Jorhat, has taken inspiring steps towards accessing their rights. It documents their ongoing struggles, achievements, and commitment for dignity and justice.

'700 of us had gathered in Rotary, Guwahati Club, that day. We were observing International Women's Day 2022 as Demands Day. Each of us carried a placard, articulating a demand for the government. Seeing our quiet confidence, you would have taken us for veteran community leaders. And yet, our collective journey had only started a few years ago ...'

Moina Das¹, 39 years, hails from Uzanbazar old railway colony in eastern Guwahati. Majority women in her informal settlement work as domestic workers, as many are non-literate, and this work helps them earn and fulfil family responsibilities. A

single parent with three dependent children, Moina started working as a domestic worker when she was only 14, and got married at 16. Reflecting on the challenges in this profession she says, 'The lack of decent wages or fixed work timings, issues of violence and abuse, absence of welfare measures and poor working conditions make our daily lives tough'.

Has anything changed in these years we ask her? Flashing her trademark smile she gestures to the women seated around her, 'Yes, the Grihokarmi Adhikar Suraksha Samiti (GASS) domestic workers' collective'. Moina is currently GASS President, Uzanbazar branch.

Of India's 41.3 lakh domestic workers (NSSO, 2011-2012) majority (27.9 lakh) are estimated to be women (Natarajan and Joseph, 2018). These numbers are contentious, as some sources peg the total domestic workers to be over 90 million (SEWA, 2014).

Despite their staggering numbers, domestic workers encounter a glaring lack of recognition by the state and administrative bodies. They may be indispensable to households, yet they are invisible when it comes to recognising their rights. Compounding these challenges is women's own devaluation of their work and worth, having internalised generations of patriarchal norms and without the agency and awareness to challenge these unjust systems.

Additionally, within India's north-eastern state of Assam, domestic workers' struggles for rights and justice acquire further significance. With Parliament passing the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019, many domestic workers, already contending with

1. All quotes in the case study have been used with informed consent of the participants

inequality and injustice, are further burdened to prove their legal status (Vishwanath and Firaque, 2019). Unlike Maharashtra, which has a State Welfare Board for domestic workers and a strong state-wide network of workers to negotiate for their rights (महाराष्ट्र राज्य घरेलूकामगार समन्वय समिती, 2020; Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action, 2019), Assam does not have this history. The struggle for justice

and rights is arduous, yet groups of determined women workers are striving to discard systemic oppression and invisibility. This case study recounts their journey of collectivising for change. While the insights emerge from contextual experiences within Assam, they serve as useful indicators for implementing similar initiatives.

HOW IT STARTS: ENGAGING ON RIGHTS AND COLLECTIVE PROCESSES

In 2016, Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA) began intervening within select informal and hill settlements in Guwahati. Over the years, YUVA's work expanded to informal and hill settlements in the eastern, western and southern parts of the city. These include settlements in Bhutnath, Santipur, Bharalumukh, Uzanbazar, Christian Basti, Narakasur Hill, Ganesh Turning, Hatigaon, Dakhingaon, Narengi, Maligaon, Six Mile and middle Guwahati, and gradually select communities of Jorhat town too.

The common characterising features of these non-notified settlements is the insecurity of land, housing, and livelihoods experienced here. Awareness of and access to social security is often challenging, especially as many marginalised persons may not possess the eligibility documents or lack the knowhow to access them on their own. Access to basic services (such as water and electricity) is severely lacking in many communities. Additionally, many of the settled areas are prone to floods and other climate hazards.

Among women residents, domestic work is the most common form of employment. It involves strenuous physical work and the nature of the job varies from part-time to full-time work. Typically, women earn in

the range of Rs 500–1,000 per month for sweeping floors, washing clothes and utensils; Rs 1,000–2,000 per month for cooking. Most of them are engaged in part-time work and are paid monthly. Their low wage rates offer no scope to break out of intergenerational poverty cycles. Yet, this is the form of work most accessible for them. Women take up jobs based on their availability and need, but most have no recourse to support frameworks in case of wages being withheld, abusive conditions at work, and in other adverse circumstances. They are often afraid to speak up for fear of losing their jobs.

‘Occasionally, newspaper reports detail how a domestic worker has been abused by her employer. Being in the profession ourselves, we know of many more such instances. We are wary, but also forced by circumstances to continue’, said Sumitra Paswan, GASS Secretary, Uzanbazar branch.

YUVA's experience of organising domestic workers in Maharashtra since the 1990s offered a broad framework to begin work with domestic workers in Guwahati. YUVA's early efforts were geared towards their rights awareness. ‘Our initial sessions focused on social security for unorganised sector workers and rights of domestic workers. The women had not been exposed to such capacity building sessions.

They started attending in very few numbers, but as their interest in these subjects grew, they recommended others to join as well', said Syeda Mehzebin Rahman, YUVA.

While these early initiatives received a promising response, the team was aware that lasting transformation would only take place if the women workers agreed to further invest in their rights and leadership journeys, collectivise, and lead advocacy efforts themselves. They shared this vision with the workers, and although there was some scepticism in the early days, many were interested to take these first steps.

'The most common question we received at this time used to be, "what will I get out of this?" Political parties had created a system of incentives in people's minds, and they sought something in exchange for what we were offering. We shared YUVA's experiences of driving collective change processes for informal workers. We placed learnings in context of their circumstances, asking them why no one was talking about their rights, welfare and that of their families, especially children. It took some time, but the women started showing more interest and began coming together to form community level collectives', said Pooja Nirala, YUVA. With YUVA's work being led by a team of women, who could form and strengthen these bonds and guide it with feminist leadership principles, more women participated over time.

Today, if this question is raised, the community collective is well capacitated to answer it themselves. Moina Das from Uzanbazar comments, 'Earlier we used to expect something (say, money or gifts) for our participation, but now we understand that this is for our rights and that will be achieved through collective demands. Over time, we have learnt and understood that *adhikar ke kake dey na, adhikar kere nite hoi* (rights cannot be given, they need to be demanded and accessed)'

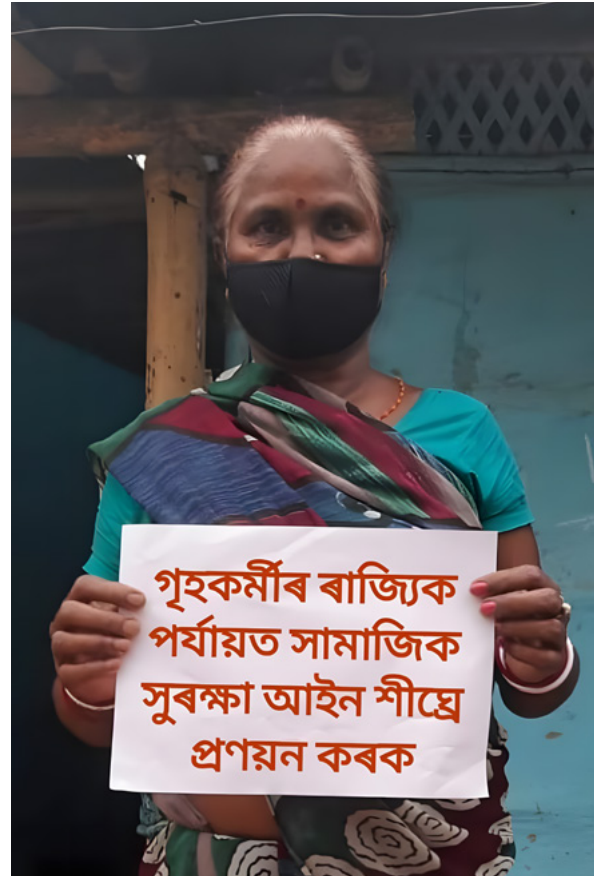


Photo 1.1: Sumitra Paswan from Uzanbazar holds up a poster demanding state legislation for domestic workers during a poster campaign on International Domestic Workers Day, 2021.

Photo credit: YUVA

FROM COMMUNITY COLLECTIVES TO A CITY-LEVEL COLLECTIVE: FORMATION AND VISIONING CHANGE WITHIN THE CURRENT CONTEXT

The first domestic workers' community collective was set up in Uzanbazar, followed by similar collectives in Kahilipara and Janakpur. A central committee was needed to coordinate the efforts of all three collectives. This is how GASS came into being in December 2017, led by a Convenor Committee. The name was jointly formulated as it encapsulates the goals of the collective. Currently, GASS has expanded to 15 branches across Guwahati and Jorhat, with more than 1,500 workers.

From the beginning, GASS was clear about its vision—to enable social security for domestic workers in the state of Assam. This acquires increasing significance, given the prevailing gap in legislation for domestic workers in the country, and especially within this state.

Even 75 years after India's independence, the country lacks a central legislation for domestic workers (Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action, 2019). The draft National Policy on Domestic Workers has been awaiting Cabinet approval since 2017 (Sarkar, 2021). In its absence the country's Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008, is the umbrella legislation under which domestic workers can seek some support. Yet, key guidelines by the Act, such as that states set up domestic worker welfare boards, have not been operationalised by most states of India, including Assam (Ibid.). In 2020, the Parliament codified 29 laws into 4 labour codes, and projected this under

the monikers of 'enhance ease of doing business' and 'Minimum Government, Maximum Governance' (Government of India, 2020). Yet, the labour codes make no mention of the 'home' as a place of work and are vague about defining employer-employee relationships, thereby excluding domestic workers from its ambit (Pal, 2021). Additionally, India is yet to ratify the International Labour Organisation Domestic Workers Convention (C189), an international treaty mandating decent work for domestic workers, denying them fundamental protections (Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2021).

Within Assam too, domestic workers' rights have been grossly ignored. The contentious National Register for Citizens process has further marginalised families that are often evicted, and sought to exclude them completely. Recently, the Assam State Labour Commission prepared the Assam State Rules of Social Security Codes, 2021, but this is still in the draft stage, and amendments by civil society are yet to be considered. A September 2022 news article highlights the Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's announcement in the state assembly about a law for domestic workers to be soon introduced (Singh, 2022). No concrete steps have been taken yet though. Civil society organisations working with domestic workers (including YUVA and GASS) have convened a Draft Preparation Committee for the Domestic Workers Policy, and aim to submit this to the Chief Minister soon.

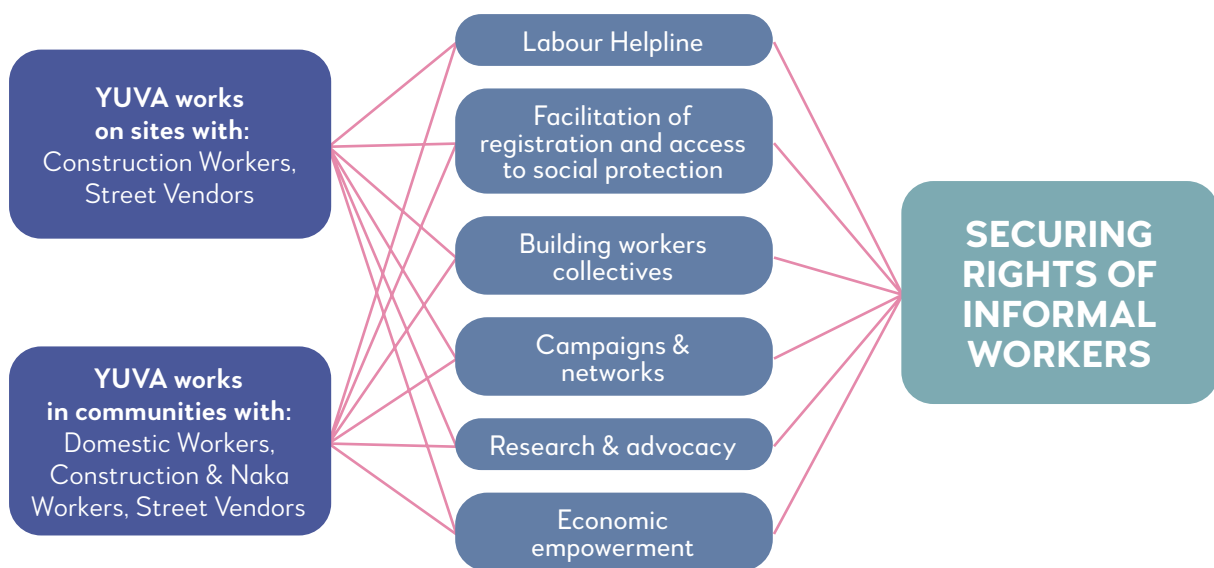
DELVING INTO INTERVENTION DESIGN: THE THEORY OF CHANGE

Since the 1990s, YUVA has worked with daily wage workers, construction workers, street vendors and domestic workers to ensure their access to just wages, working conditions and social protection. We recognise the unique circumstances and location of domestic work, which makes it imperative to ensure differentiated strategies for action.

Our organising framework takes into account the unique nature of domestic work. To start with, domestic work is highly decentralised. 'Building mass organizations of domestic workers is far more time and resource intensive than it is in other sectors. Yet, domestic workers are notoriously short on time, working very long hours, and having the double duty of caring for their own families. Organizing possibilities are even more limited for live-in domestic workers, and for migrant domestic workers' (Hobden, 2015). In addition to organising workers and sharply defining the employment relationship (whether with a householder or a

placement agency), it is equally critical to consider the power equation, given the replaceability of domestic workers (Ibid.). The role of feminist leadership principles, and learnings from women's rights movements have further guided the theory of change for this initiative. In line with Standing's definition (2011) of the 'precariat' and their lack of seven forms of labour-oriented security² domestic workers too find themselves similarly disadvantaged. Our work seeks to plug these gaps and challenges, with people-led advocacy and change methods.

Our demand framework for workers' rights and social security coverage is also aligned to International Labour Organization (ILO) recommendations (published in 2016) that social security systems should be inclusive, affordable, simple, guarantee compliance and be attractive (both to domestic workers and from a financing point of view).



YUVA's interventions with informal workers

2. Security of the labour market [adequate opportunity], employment [protection against arbitrary dismissal], job [to retain a niche], work [protection from accidents, illnesses, etc.], skill reproduction [opportunity to gain skills], income [adequate stable pay] and representation [a collective voice in the labour market]

Our result framework is focused on the formation and strengthening of strong local collectives and an umbrella federation, which are empowered to advocate with the state and employers. The success

of this framework relies on the ability to sustain a people-led movement for a dignified life for domestic workers with access to social protection.

THE THEORY OF CHANGE



DETAILING THE HOW & WHAT



YUVA's theory of change with domestic workers

EARLY DAYS: BUILDING HABITS, GROWING TRUST...

'We have been so busy working in our homes and that of others that we did not have any space for ourselves, leave alone to tackle the issues we were confronting daily. But once we started speaking to one another, we gained a new energy from our participation. We knew we had to keep this going!'

- Anju Talukdar, GASS Secretary,
Ganesh Turning branch.

Members of different GASS branches set in place routines to ensure that they met regularly, at least weekly. This was a new habit for them, as their hectic lives had no space for this kind of regular discussion and planning. In some communities, the YUVA team needed to encourage them to keep attending. But once these habits stuck, the collectives became more self-sustaining. As

members' capacities built, they could offer better support to one another and take ownership of their struggles with a concrete action plan for change.

Trust building was key and it took time. In some communities in Guwahati, YUVA had already been working to support people's rights and advocacy. 'In Uzanbazar, we had supported people's access to legal entitlements and resisted forced evictions. In Narengi, we had facilitated a campaign for people's access to electricity. With the National Register for Citizens being announced, we had extensively facilitated people's documentation across the city, even bringing in expert support. We had raised the issue of pensions for domestic workers above 60 years. Our ongoing advocacy with the State Labour Commissioner led to the reintroduction of identity cards for unorganised sector workers in 2018. This was much needed, as domestic workers did not have any identity card related to their work', said Bhaskar Kalita, YUVA. All these initiatives built women's trust in the process, and each woman leader became an ambassador of further change, inviting more participation from domestic workers in the process.



Photo 1.2: Domestic workers' registration camp in association with District Labour Commission in 2020

Photo credit: YUVA

STRATEGISING FOR CHANGE: FORMULATING NEEDS, SETTING UP REDRESSAL PROCESSES, BUILDING CAPACITY, FURTHERING RIGHTS AWARENESS AND ADVOCACY

GASS branches organise weekly meetings to discuss issues and demands, and follow up on ongoing work. Since 2017, the collective has maintained a Facebook page through which they share updates of their ongoing and upcoming initiatives, and invite support from people. They maintain records of the meetings and discussions, and manage the overheads for their travel and meeting refreshments, as possible. Capacity building sessions and larger campaigns are supported by YUVA.

'My day starts at 4 am. Many domestic workers, like me, complete household chores by 6 am; then we set out for work. I work in three houses and return by 3 pm to prepare lunch for my family. At 5 pm weekly, our GASS branch meets to discuss our rights and strategise to build a movement. We know this is hard, but if we lose hope we wouldn't achieve anything. GASS has given us a platform to raise awareness and our voice, so we use this space to demand for our rights, said Sushila Sarkar of Narakasur Hill, Kahilipara.

OVER THE YEARS, HERE ARE SOME OF THE MAJOR WAYS IN WHICH GASS HAS INTERVENED:

COLLECTIVELY FRAMING DEMANDS AS WORKERS

In their branch meetings, the collective members have been identifying challenges and framing them sharply. They have also been developing innovative strategies to address them. Women workers have sought responses to everyday issues faced at the individual level (loss of wages, unsafe working conditions, and so on) as well as long-term social

security and welfare concerns. Every month, central level meetings of the Grihokarmi Adhikar Suraksha Samiti are held, attended by key representatives from each branch. The discussion and strategies at these meetings are disseminated and contextualised for action at the branch level.



Photo 1.3: Domestic workers holding up their Unorganised Workers registration cards at Uzanbazar, Guwahati

Photo credit: YUVA

Workers' participation in group meetings across 2017–18 and ongoing interventions helped them collectively formulate and raise major demands related to minimum wage, pension, weekly leave, medical assistance, insurance, scholarships for children, among others. This is especially in light of the lack of a state-level Social Security Act, even though the 2008 Central Act mandated this.

Additionally, in light of the pandemic and increasing vulnerabilities, GASS and workers' groups demanded one-time one-lakh compensation to all domestic workers, for their prolonged loss of work and wages. Although they have submitted these demands to the Labour Commission and the Chief Minister through the District Commissioner, responses are awaited.

PIONEERING A WAGE THEFT RECOVERY PROCESS FOR INDIVIDUAL WORKERS

GASS branches have devised a process to effectively respond to domestic workers' employment related disputes. For instance, if a worker reports a wage related issue within a certain area, the corresponding branch sends a letter to the employer requesting them to resolve this. Follow ups are taken, and mediation support is offered if necessary. Despite regular follow ups, if the employer does not address the issue, the collective finally reports this to the District Labour Court for further action.

Jyotsna Begum, a single mother and a worker from Lachit Nagar shares her predicament. Her employer would keep citing medical emergencies or lack of money, and one day she dismissed her from work without clearing her payments of the past seven months. 'I would get panic attacks, thinking of the wage loss. How would I run my family? I reported this issue to GASS and the collective sent a letter to my employer. Thanks to the pressure they exerted, I received my full wage for seven months.'

BUILDING CAPACITIES

GASS collective members undergo regular capacity building sessions, focusing on strengthening their collective processes, building their knowledge of rights, welfare schemes and access, and more. 'The focus on constant learning builds understanding and capacity. By reiterating demands, we are able

to make our family and employer understand them and we are clear that this is intended towards policy makers, not employers. So we are trying to receive solidarity from our employers too', says Renu Das from Christian Basti.



Photo 1.4: Domestic workers observing Demands Day and raising their voices for change on 8 March 2022

Photo credit: YUVA

In 2018, YUVA and GASS were able to raise questions on the lack of social security for domestic workers during the State Assembly Zero Hour Session via the Opposition MLA Mamun Imdadul Haque Choudhury. This was possible due to their constant advocacy efforts.

ENSURING DOMESTIC WORKERS' ISSUES BECOME ADVOCACY ISSUES IN THE STATE ASSEMBLY

With growing pressure from city workers' groups, registrations under the 2008 Act were speeded up over the coming weeks, although workers needed to wait for the state scheme announcement to avail any benefits .

Unfortunately, no scheme has been finalised yet! In December 2018, the Assam Government shared the draft Domestic Workers Social Security Scheme, Assam,

2018. While it did contain provisions on skill training, health insurance and maternity leave, it was silent on many other aspects. GASS submitted amendments to the State Labour Commission, in consultation with civil society. There has been no update on this since then.

During the 2022 Budget Session of the State Legislative Assembly, YUVA and GASS raised questions via MLA Ashraful Hussain about the lack of social security for domestic workers, sought an update on the 2018 State Draft Domestic Workers Social Security Scheme and queried what would happen to provisions for domestic workers in the 2008 Social Security Act, with the announcement of the recent Labour Codes. The YUVA team was allowed to participate as an audience in the debate. Unfortunately, no satisfactory answers were received on these questions.

The Assembly advocacy was further taken ahead in an organised manner, with the formation of a collective named Draft Preparation Committee of State Legislation for Domestic Workers (YUVA is a part of it) who initiated the drafting of the state legislation. An advocate of Gauhati High Court helped compile the bill, and through a consultation the draft was finalised to take it ahead. This draft bill is named, Assam Domestic Workers (Regulation of Work and Social Security) Bill, 2023 which was shared with Mr Debabrata Saikia (Opposition Leader and Member of Legislative Assembly, Assam). He presented this as a Private Member Bill in the Assam Legislative Assembly Budget Session, 2023, for debate and discussion. It was withdrawn with an assurance from the Labour Minister, Assam, to ratify a state legislation in the near future.

The Draft Preparation Committee have taken the Bill ahead in the form of a campaign to build public consensus. A signature campaign is being led by the drafting committee to be submitted to the Labour Minister and Chief Minister of Assam to bring to light the importance of the legislation and access to social protection for domestic workers, denied over the years.

While advocacy may not be yielding immediate results, it gives GASS and its members a belief that issues that they thought would never have a hearing are even being discussed in the Legislative Assembly as a result of their advocacy efforts.

Mehena Begum, a single mother from Christian Basti, came across GASS during the pandemic induced lockdown. At that time, she was out of work and had walked a long distance to access ration relief, but to no avail. While returning home she met Pooja Nirala from YUVA and shared her challenges.

Pooja supported her, through the relief programme underway. Mehena was introduced to GASS later, and started attending the sessions. Today she is a strong collective leader, who mobilises and builds a strong network among workers. She attributes her leadership to the group learning processes.

CONSCIENTISING WORKERS, EMPLOYERS AND THE PUBLIC

To ensure deeper awareness about domestic workers' rights among themselves and within the public, the collective engages in creative ways. For instance, the Uzanbazar and Bhaskar Nagar branches enacted street plays on issues they were facing. Their presentations were well received and increased people's awareness and solidarity with their struggles. The collective has also participated in important seminars and live talk shows to share their experiences and challenges (GASS, 2021; officialyuva, unpublished).

GASS has also leveraged important international days to amplify their demands. In 2021, for instance, members observed Domestic Workers' Rights Week through a detailed week-long campaign, which included a street play, mural painting, rights based discussions and distribution of informative pamphlets. This campaign was also widely shared on the GASS social media page, and received a good response from civil society. On International Womens' Day 2022, the collective submitted their memorandum of demands to the Chief Minister through the District Commissioner.

IMPACT OF GASS

Since 2016, the outputs from this process include, the formation of 15 local branches and the GASS federation with an elected convenor committee led by domestic workers themselves; women enabling individual case work through the collective; empowered workers engaging with the state and employers, registration of domestic workers under the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008; enabling access to state schemes such as Orunodoi and formation of savings groups.

Over 5 years we have seen the following outcomes as being crucial to achieving our goal of ensuring legal and social recognition. These include, the expansion of the GASS network into another city, coalition building on domestic workers' rights at the state level, domestic workers themselves encouraging other workers to join GASS, wage recovery during the time of the pandemic, the formation of self support groups and the issue of domestic work being raised in the state legislative assembly.

AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S IDENTITIES

'We would refer to ourselves as *kaamwalis*, *gharat kaam kara bai*. But now we have popularised and

adopted a dignified name for our work—we are Grihokarmis', says Minu Bhuyan of Narakasur Hill.

More than anything else, women's participation in GASS has developed their identity. Many of them had previously not looked upon their profession in

terms of how it builds their identity and agency. Their participation in GASS has enabled this shift.

DEVELOPING WOMEN'S AGENCY

'Earlier, even if I knew that something wrong was happening to me, I would be scared to raise my voice. I was worried that my job would go. But now, the collective has given me such strength that I resist injustice, and even encourage other women to report it when it arises in their life', says Usha Devi of Happy Villa area of Guwahati. This empowerment has also come through the various sessions of domestic violence, gender discrimination where the workers have learned to speak up and raise their

voice. In one such session, they were also guided about where to report cases of domestic violence, either at home or at the workplace.

Women's participation in GASS has played a strong role in developing their agency. 'GASS members are empowered at home, in their workplace, and are not afraid to make their voices heard', says Pooja Nirala, YUVA.

ENABLING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

It is undeniable that women's participation in GASS has developed their leadership potential. Where the role models for changemakers in their community were earlier men, this has shifted with women's participation and leadership in recent years. As community leaders, they are confident, articulate,

able to work with one another on shared values and needs, and take it forward for action. Bina Bharali from Dakhingaon says 'I stood up for myself and without knowing I am now raising a voice for several other women. This has been empowering through the years and helped us stay united till date'.



Photo 1.5: Domestic workers performing a street play during Domestic Workers Rights Week in 2021

Photo credit: YUVA



Photo 1.6: Health camp underway for domestic workers at Jorhat

Photo credit: YUVA

AT THE FAMILY LEVEL

ENCOURAGING A SHIFT BEYOND TRADITIONAL ROLES

The growth in women's identity and leadership has also shifted their roles within the family, to a lesser or larger extent as the case may be. The act of regularly meeting up as a collective, even in the evenings, was unthinkable for many of the women workers earlier. In many cases, the support

from their families has helped the women engage deeper in this change-making process. Infact, the women's collective articulation to be more self-supporting at the individual and family level, led to the self-supporting groups they have formed at the community level (detailed as follows).

AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY

Women's participation in GASS has helped them form stronger bonds with one another. This has allowed them to overcome religion/caste-based discrimination in many instances.

'Today we speak as "one". We recognise the challenges in our daily lives and strive for a supportive environment for each other. GASS has been a strong unifying force for us', says Renu Das of Christian Basti.

Even during the time of the pandemic, the presence of an established GASS collective meant that the women were able to identify and support community needs much more seamlessly with partner support. Had these networks not existed, it would have been almost impossible to reach most marginalised households in need.



Photo 1.7: Self help group meetings with domestic workers in Guwahati (2022)

Photo credit: YUVA

ENABLING COMMUNITY SUPPORT SYSTEMS

GASS ensures that basis identified needs, interventions are planned. For instance, given the ongoing health requirements a Jorhat GASS district committee identified the need for a health camp. Through this health camp it was the first time women workers felt that attention was given to their bodies and health needs. Many women suffer from occupation related health hazards such as gastritis, hypertension, body aches. The health camp and awareness created a space for them to prioritise

their overlooked health needs. Many workers also face different kinds of violence at home. GASS organised a session on domestic violence and harassment at the home and workplace. They shared information on relevant laws, policies and whom to approach on encountering violence. Conversations on domestic violence and other sensitive or taboo topics have been normalised by the collective, and are much more in the open.

STRENGTHENING COLLECTIVE ECONOMIC CAPACITIES

In some communities, women have started forming self-help groups. They pool in savings to create a revolving fund, which the community can access in need. These interventions have also been extended

to members beyond GASS. In the running of this self-support group, women are also learning other valuable skills such as bookkeeping and accounts.

AT THE SYSTEMIC LEVEL

REPRESENTATIONS AT DIVERSE FORUMS

GASS members have been invited to different forums to share their experiences, present their demands and build advocacy pressure for action. They recently participated at a state-level three day meeting, 'Defending the Rights of the

Marginalised in Times of COVID 19 and Beyond' by Human Rights Law Network, presenting their experiences and challenges. Their presentations are helping them build support within civil society.

RECOGNITION BY STATE OFFICIALS

Due to their consistent advocacy efforts, GASS is now well recognised by state departments, especially the District Labour Commission in Guwahati, and by many members of the State Legislative Assembly. Many workers registration camps and e-Shram registration camps were

carried out in partnership with the District Labour Commission. GASS is invited to different state initiatives and campaigns led by the State Labour Departments. Their official recognition is critical for their ongoing work and the shifts it can enable, given the apathy which has existed earlier within the state.

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ON DOMESTIC WORKERS

With the empowerment of GASS members, and their ownership of change efforts, it has also been possible to shift the narrative on domestic work. Conversations with trade unions, other non-profits working with unorganised workers, academicians, progressive writers, journalists, and others, have paved the way for a greater valuing of domestic workers' rights. Civil society in Guwahati now has a better understanding of domestic workers' needs

and are helping amplify them actively. During Domestic Worker's Week in 2021, different civil society members spoke up for domestic workers. GASS's social media shares have also played a role in building this narrative. In the coming days, sessions between employers and domestic workers are also planned, to build better understanding among each other and ensure social protection for domestic workers.



Photo 1.8: Workers present their insights at the state-level meeting by HRLN, 2021

Photo credit: YUVA



Photo 1.9: A wall painting highlighting demands of the GASS collective at G.S Road, 2021

Photo credit: YUVA

EMERGING CHALLENGES

Although GASS members raise their voices for change, they face resistance from different quarters. Within their own families, many have faced taunts and resistance for this work. With the growth in their leadership capacities and their ability to exert pressure on the state, some of this criticism has now turned to support. In some recent programmes, members have invited their families to be a part of the processes for putting forward their demands, and this has garnered family support. In some cases, the collective has offered information regarding social protection to husbands regarding their work (registration and benefits for construction workers and street vendors). In some cases though, women are still fighting patriarchal and restrictive norms, to continue their work in GASS.

Additionally, given the economic and social pressures on them, women do find it challenging to make time for their regular participation.

As domestic workers have no weekly leave, their participation in the collective and ensuing programmes often means negotiating the loss of pay with their employers. Some of them also lose their jobs in the process. At a collective meeting, Rejiya Begum from Bhaskar Nagar says, 'I will lose my pay for the day, but I have come to the meeting to be an example. If we do not take out-of-the-box steps, we will not be able to achieve our rights. I have heard that unity is strength; our work in this collective is making me realise the value of our joint struggles to reach shared goals. We must try to explain to our employers why this is important. I hope they will understand and stand with us in solidarity'. The question of resourcing of the collective is also a key consideration, as it strengthens and moves forward.

As the workers' collective raises tough questions to state authorities, women workers are also aware of the risks of backlash due to the confrontational

stances they need to engage in. The fear of being detained is real, with the state frequently clamping down on resisting voices. Maintaining their motivation within a system where change is a

slow process can also be challenging. However, the women offer great emotional support to each other, to navigate these concerns.

LEARNINGS FROM GASS

What highlights the work of this domestic workers' collective is the commitment of the women workers who are a part of it. 'Seeing their trust and confidence in the participatory process is empowering for us. Without their collectivising, none of this would have been possible', says Syeda Mehzebin Rahman, YUVA. GASS offers valuable lessons on a collective approach for change.

At the core of the success of the intervention, is the commitment of grassroot organisers who are able to sustain the trust of every member of the collective. Between 2016 and 2020, YUVA developed and led this intervention, simultaneously building the capacities of leaders of GASS. In 2021 as the work expanded, we engaged women from different communities to organise within their neighbourhoods. This decentralisation has ensured that both outreach and last mile connectivity with workers increase. While this comes with its challenges, ensuring regular meetings, reviewing the process, planning together, enables a common understanding of the process. YUVA is committed to setting up sustainable processes, to ensure

members strengthen and lead their collective over time. GASS is currently not a registered collective. They charge no membership fees. Moving forward, the collective will have to consider these decisions, from the point of economic and organisational sustainability.

To ensure the collective grows and progresses in their vision, YUVA will draw from its experience of working with workers' collectives across the country while being aware of the need to be agile, given the Assam context. To be able to replicate this in another state or city, the GASS experience charts a valuable path forward.

YUVA acknowledges the support of donors Misereor, Germany in starting this work in 2016; Comic Relief, UK that sustained various interventions to strengthen the work with domestic workers since 2019. This has also ensured deepening of the work in Guwahati and expansion of this work to Jorhat with the Global Fund for Women, USA.

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ABOUT YUVA

Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA) is a non-profit development organisation committed to enabling vulnerable groups to access their rights. YUVA encourages the formation of people's collectives that engage in the discourse on development, thereby ensuring self-determined and sustained collective action in communities. This work is complemented with advocacy and policy recommendations. Founded in Mumbai in 1984, currently YUVA operates in the states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Assam and New Delhi.

At the community-level, through an integrated 360-degree approach, YUVA delivers solutions on issues of housing, livelihood, environment and governance. Through research, YUVA creates knowledge that enhances capacity building. Through partnerships in campaigns, YUVA provides solidarity and builds strong alliances to drive change.

