



# STORIES OF SURVIVAL

Documenting stories of Domestic workers from Perumbakkam and Kannagi Nagar



NORWEGIAN  
HUMAN RIGHTS FUND



## Editors' Note:

Welcome to this powerful compilation of case stories shared by the wonderful women in our community. These stories are a testament to resilience and survival. Many of these women were married at a very young age, gave birth to multiple children in their young age, and were abandoned by their husbands. Turning to domestic work, they endure lives of never-ending agony. This is the reality for the majority of women we work with, while there are also those who face different circumstances.

Organizing these domestic workers from resettlement areas and working with them throughout these years has been a challenging yet rewarding journey. It requires constant efforts, but witnessing the growth of these women alongside us is truly the most fulfilling part of our work. Through our partnership with NHRF, we have been able to create meaningful changes in the lives of the domestic workers we work with.

We express our sincere gratitude to NHRF, the dedicated community mobilizers of Perumbakkam and Kannagi Nagar, and our Domestic Worker Leaders, whose commitment and passion drive our efforts forward.

Thank you,  
TNDWWT

**Note:** All the pictures and stories collected for this compilation have been shared with the consent of the domestic workers involved.

*"This centre is more like a home for us. Some days When It is overwhelming. I buy a bunch of spinach, sit in this corner, talk to the staff here and go back home."*

Jaychitra, a strong member of TNDWWT and a mother of 2. Her daughter was married off, and her son, who is differently-abled, is staying with her. Although he has a minor disability, Jaychithra was afraid to let him go out and live on his own due to occasional fits.

She went through a challenging phase when her husband fell sick, and she had to work while managing to look after both her son and husband. Actively participating in training sessions organized for the prevention of violence against women, Jaychithra engaged in open discussions and deep talks about the inconveniences and struggles women face. These conversations highlighted the importance of socialization and the satisfaction of leading an independent life, which she understood through discussions, movies, mental health advisors, etc. She decided to let her son go to work as he wished.

Once her son started making friends in his workplace, he felt much better about life. Jayachithra noticed a positive change in his mental and physical health. In the past year, her son hasn't experienced fits or related conditions, and Jayachithra started feeling more independent and confident. Her son is no longer an obstacle to her being an independent leader and domestic worker.





*"I always wanted to start a hotel of my own. With the little earnings I had, I used to buy vessels and plates that would look good in my hotel. But, I couldn't make into it as I was restricted by my husband. Later after his time, I had the responsibility to look after my family. When all these problems got sorted my children did not want me to start a hotel. I kept working the same way I used to till now. After going around as a teacher, I started pulling out my plates—now I take it with me for my trainings"*

Pushpa, a resilient senior domestic worker residing in Perumbakkam, has faced the hardships of forced eviction and the ensuing challenges of poverty. Originally from Chetpet, she was compelled to relocate to adversities she encountered, Pushpa has emerged as a pillar of strength in her community. Being an active member of TNDWWT and its activities, she never fails to be there in the meetings and trainings. Pushpa is also known for her cooking skills, for which she is proud of herself.

Pushpa, who was an active participant in masala making trainings, is now a Masala making skill-trainer. She initially trained the people of her area - Perumbakkam and later started being a trainer for several other places in Chennai. Initially, she was accompanied by someone to go places, but now she moves to places on her own. She has grown more confident to speak her mind than ever before. "I enjoy trying more masalas at home, selling them, getting feedback on them, and then teaching it to my fellow mates."

*"I may have failed in life many times, but I wanted to be a good mother for my children... I did my best. I have been running all through my life, now it is for me!"*



Thirupura Sundhari, a 45-year-old single mother, worked tirelessly to provide the best for her children. Married at a very young age to her husband, Venkatesh, she faced the loss of her spouse early on. Left with two young children, she embarked on a challenging journey. Domestic work became her primary source of income, and she worked for multiple households to ensure her children received a good education. Her pride shines through when speaking of her well-educated sons.

Her first son, Satheesh, is now working and married, while the second son, Karthik, is with Thirupura Sundari and has also started working. Throughout this time, Thirupura Sundari worked far from home, facing physical issues in the process. Despite the challenges, she always had a desire to start a new business and settle down near her home.

Discussing her aspirations with other domestic workers and her family, she received support from her children and group members. Encouraged by this support, she ventured into starting a garment business and now owns a small shop.

After a lifetime of struggles for her children, Thirupura Sundari is finally experiencing relief and a slower, steadier pace of life

*"I was shattered with the incident! I grabbed the bleeding child from the floor and ran to hospital. ...I was not satisfied, with the help of them I informed child line to take away the child, they took her away. Hope she is in safe hands...In fact who knows where girl children are free? We do what we can!"*



Almost a year ago, while Devi was returning from her workplace, she heard an unnatural sound from one of her neighbor's homes. She climbed the stairs and knocked on the door. The house belonged to a guest labourer from North India, and Devi wasn't familiar with their language.

The owner opened the door, and to Devi's shock, she found a girl child of about --- lying down and bleeding. The owner and father of the child claimed that she had fallen down and injured herself. However, Devi, sensing something amiss, moved the child's clothes and discovered that she was heavily bleeding. Wrapping the child in a cloth, she called for help. Along with other residents, Devi took the child to the hospital. It was revealed that the child had been a victim of a rape attempt by her own father. The police arrested the perpetrator, but the mother continued to defend her husband, unveiling a deeper issue of child trafficking.

Devi provided her statement to the police, the women's helpline, ChildLine, and hospital staff, advocating for the child's better care and asserting that the family was unfit to care for her. After hospitalization, the child was taken in by ChildLine and rehabilitated. Devi's timely efforts played a crucial role in ensuring justice for the child

*" I had to go through fear every minute of my life, blackmailing and character assassination happened daily. I wasn't able to share it with anybody, as I would be tagged as thief again...More than money or anything, what matters to me now is peace and dignity."*

Bakyalakshmi one day explained the constant threatening from the employer to the domestic worker leader in perumbakkam, who took up the case. Bakshyalakshmi the affected domestic worker had to leave her job and take up another lower paying job nearby due to workload that kept increasing day by day. Bakyalakshmi also found herself physically weak to travel long distances any more. She informed the employer about the issue within no time.

The employer on the receipt of this information started to threaten her to re-join work in her place. she started blackmailing her for the case of theft accusation and defamation. Bakyalakshmi was also subjected to mental and emotional torture by regular phone calls and rude conversations by her employer. Bakkiyalakshmi was ready to repay the salary amount to the employer once she receives salary.

The employer kept disturbing her even after agreeing to pay back the money. In this situation she took help from Rajeswari, the domestic worker leader, recorded one of her employer's phone calls since they were sure that not even police are going to believe her without evidence.

Later after the intervention of TNDWWT, the domestic worker leader the issue was resolved in mutual understanding.



*"My mother lived for me all her life, life gifted me another mother who has the same purity and kindness. Now I have two mothers. And, I am very happy that I could take care of them both.... we even live in the same street."*

Deepa is a domestic worker and a resident of Semmenchery. She lives with her family of five members. She has been working as a domestic worker for a long time because her husband, who was a lift operator, did not have a stable income to run the family.

Recently, Deepa was introduced to the domestic worker's groups in her locality, through which she learned about opportunities, government benefits, and the potential to expand her work. She discovered caregiver vacancies she could apply for and connected with domestic workers who had previously done that job. Slowly, after learning from her fellow mates, she switched her work to being a patient caretaker.

Currently, she works as a caretaker for a patient, preferring night duty to balance both work and life with a fair income. Deepa and her husband have arrived at a mutual agreement to contribute their best to their family, including school-going children and elderly parents. After her night duty, Deepa ensures that both her mothers are doing well. She brought her mothers from their natives and arranged their accommodations nearby their homes and takes good care of them, providing food and financial support. Meanwhile, her husband ensures that their children have food, study, and complete their daily chores. This distribution of responsibility and fair income has transformed their lives positively.





*"I was a shy person initially. These people have helped me a lot with that. Now look at me, I walk around with all these snacks and stuff in the evenings and ask strangers to have some snacks...Some experience of coming out are funny, like mine"*



Meet Kaveri, a resilient 35-year-old domestic worker from Ezhil Nagar, Perumbakkam, Chennai. With two children to raise and a household to support, Kaveri has been navigating the complexities of life for the past four years. Her husband, employed as a carpenter, contributes to the family income, but challenges persist. Originally from Tiruverkad, Kaveri's journey took a transformative turn when the family was evicted from their houses. She joined the domestic worker groups in Perumbakkam 4 years ago. She was thinking of additional avenues to secure her family's future, Kaveri used to share her ideas and concerns in the group.

Recognizing the importance of education for her two children - one in 11th grade and the other in 8th - Kaveri embraced the idea that both partners should contribute more to the family. With determination in her heart, she embarked on a new venture - an evening snacks centre. She cooks in shop and also go door to door with the snacks.

Kaveri's snack shop has not only become a source of livelihood but also a symbol of her resilience. The additional income from the business has eased the financial burden, allowing Kaveri to provide for her family's needs and invest in her children's education.

*"Old age is not at all as I expected. I thought I would die of all the experiences I had recently...the pain is real. Even now deep down I cry for what I had to go through. But now that I am on my own, nobody questions me like that anymore."*

Pachaiyammal's tale is one of overcoming adversity. Left widowed at a young age, she became the sole provider for her daughter, and together they navigated life's challenges. When her daughter, Revathi, faced the loss of her husband, they moved in together, creating a small yet tight-knit family. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted their lives, restricting Pachaiyammal from her regular domestic work. In response to the financial strain and with a desire to support her family, Revathi joined the workforce.

However, beneath this tale of resilience lies a darker chapter. Pachaiyammal faced abuse, was beaten up, and was compelled to leave her home by her daughter. Despite reporting the abuse, nobody intervened, dismissing it as a "family dispute." TNDWWT intervened, providing the necessary support and resolving the issues. Pachaiyammal was accepted back home.

Pachaiyammal's story is one of triumph over adversity. Despite the challenges, she emerged stronger, financially independent, and now runs her own shop and lives peacefully in her own space.



*"I loved to go to school, and wanted to be an engineer. But life was hard on me. I couldn't complete my college. I had to discontinue by college education when I was doing my B.E (Bachelor of Engineering). I did not want to lose all the power of my education. I now teach school going children of young age, mostly children of domestic workers after my working hours."*

Saumundeswari is a young domestic worker in Perumbakkam. Her husband and two young children make up her entire family. Married off early due to poverty, she had to forgo her education and engage in domestic work for livelihood. Despite facing challenges, she is an enthusiastic learner and teacher.

Saumundeswari couldn't complete her graduation in engineering due to familial pressure. This unfulfilled academic aspiration always lingered within her. Although she had to work as a domestic worker for income, she refused to settle for that alone. During this time, she decided to leverage her skills and knowledge to educate the children in her community. Saumundeswari started providing lessons for young children, primarily from domestic worker families whose parents are not literate or unable to assist them in studies. She became their favourite teacher, teaching them not only from books but also songs and dances.

Currently, with a baby, she is on a break. Still she engages in evening shop keeping and domestic work. During her free time, she crafts handmade bags and sells them. Saumundeswari is a determined domestic worker who never settles until her heart says "enough."



*"I am grateful for the support and empowerment I have received from TNDWWT. It has transformed me from a timid domestic worker to a confident leader for women's and workers' rights. I am determined to continue fighting for our rights and empowering others in my community."*



Vijayalakshmi, aged 51, has 20 years of experience working as a domestic worker. Currently working full-time in a household. She travels approximately 20 km each way from Ezhil Nagar, returning home by 7:00 pm. Mrs. Vijayalakshmi lost her husband, Durai, to alcoholism ten years ago. Mrs. Vijayalakshmi has two daughters. Her elder daughter, Durga Devi, and Her younger daughter, Kaviya, is 27 years old, runs a fancy store, and has a daughter and a son.

Mrs. Vijayalakshmi became aware of the Tamilnadu Domestic Workers Welfare Trust (TNDWWT) after being relocated to Kannagi Nagar eight years ago. Initially, she attended basic training and later showed keen interest, regularly attending consultations and training sessions organized by the TNDWWT. She attended a training on the ILO 189 convention organized by TNDWWT, which provided insights into women's rights and domestic workers' rights. The TNDWWT and the union have had a profound impact on Mrs. Vijayalakshmi's life. Through their training and consultations, she has gained a deeper understanding of her rights as a woman and a domestic worker. This has improved her working conditions and also had a positive impact on her personal life. She is now better equipped to deal with challenges and has a stronger support network through the domestic worker collectives.

*"After attending the training organized by TNDWWT, I negotiated for and received Employee State Insurance (ESI) and Provident Fund (PF) benefits from my workplace. This has provided me with financial security and access to healthcare.."*

Mahalakshmi, aged 37, studied up to the 6th grade. She has 5 years of part-time work experience as a domestic worker, working 5 to 6 hours a day for a monthly salary of Rs. 5000. She works as a housekeeper in a Jain college, which is 3 km away from her house. Mahalakshmi was displaced due to eviction in 2014 and has been residing in Kannagi Nagar for the past 10 years in her own house. Mahalakshmi's husband, Subramani, is 45 years old and works as a painter on a daily wage basis. They have two children: Pragadheswaran, aged 12, studying in the 7th standard in a government school, and Hema, aged 10, studying in the 5th standard in a government school.

Mahalakshmi attended skill training organized by the Tamilnadu Domestic Workers Welfare Trust (TNDWWT), where she learned various skills such as cooking, phenol, and soap oil making. She also attended legal rights training organized for domestic workers in Kannagi Nagar. After attending the training sessions on legal rights, Mahalakshmi asked for Employee State Insurance (ESI) and Provident Fund (PF) benefits from her workplace for several months. Due to the awareness she gained through the training, she eventually received these benefits, which have provided her with financial security and access to healthcare.

The training provided by TNDWWT has empowered Mahalakshmi with the knowledge and skills to improve her working conditions and advocate for her rights.



*"After attending the training organized by TNDWWT, I learned about the Domestic Violence Act and how to address issues through the women's helpline 181. This knowledge empowered me to rescue a neighbour from domestic violence and harassment, and thanks to the team for educating the uneducated."*



Shobanaa, aged 35, studied up to 9th standard education and has been working as a part-time domestic worker for the past 10 years, earning INR 1500 per month. She resides in Ezhil Nagar, Chennai, where she has been living for the past 8 years. Previously, she lived in a thatched house near the Cooum river at Teynampet, Thiru. V. K Nagar. Shobanaa's husband, Lingeshwaran, aged 38, has studied up to the 10th standard and works as a load man on daily wages, earning Rs. 500 per day. They have two children: Blessan, and Blessy.

Shobanaa has attended skill training sessions organized by the Tamilnadu Domestic Workers Welfare Trust (TNDWWT), where she learned various skills such as cooking, masala making, phenol making, and housekeeping. She also attended legal rights training on the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAWG) training. One specific impact of the training was that Shobanaa became familiar with the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act and learned how to address issues through the Women Helpline 181. She used this knowledge to help rescue a neighbour woman from domestic violence and harassment. Subsequently, she has been educating others about these issues during floor meetings and among her neighbours.

*"I gained a better understanding of my rights. And that's also one of the reasons I have the confidence to do multi-task to uplift my livelihood."*

Sudali, aged 60, has been residing in Ezhil Nagar for the past 10 years, owning her house. She works part-time as a domestic worker. Additionally, she runs a tiffin shop during evenings. Sudali's husband, Valan, aged 68, has health issues and recently underwent an operation, rendering him unable to work.

Sudali attended a consultation for domestic workers' rights in Chennai organized by the Tamilnadu Domestic Workers Welfare Trust (TNDWWT). The consultation organized by TNDWWT has provided Sudali with valuable information and knowledge about her rights as a domestic worker. One specific impact of the consultation is that Sudali now has a better understanding of her rights as a domestic worker. This knowledge has enabled her to assert her rights in her workplace and seek better working conditions. Additionally, she can now educate other domestic workers in her community about their rights in floor meetings.

Sudali's increased awareness and advocacy for her rights have benefited her and also her family. With her husband's health issues,



*"After receiving training on domestic workers' rights, I advocated for and successfully secured bonuses during festivals and the right to take Sundays off. This has greatly improved my work-life balance."*



Durgadevi, aged 30, has been living in Ezhil Nagar for 8 years, previously resided in a T Nagar slum. She has been working as a domestic worker for 12 years, earning 3000 INR monthly on a part-time basis for 2.5 hours, without Sundays off or bonuses. Family Background: Durgadevi's husband, Venkatesan, aged 34, works as a painter, earning 600 INR daily. She has two daughters: Neema Sri, aged 10, studying in the 6th standard at Akshara School, and Yoshika Sri, aged 1. Durgadevi has undergone training on domestic workers' rights and now represents her union. She was aware that in consultation we are negotiating with the government to revise the minimum wage act to Rs 100 for 1 hour of work. The training and advocacy efforts have led to concrete changes in Durgadevi's work life.

One specific impact of the training is that Durgadevi has successfully negotiated for bonuses and Sundays off. She now receives bonuses and has Sundays off, improvements she secured by advocating for her rights. This has not only improved her working conditions but has also empowered her to advocate for fair treatment for all domestic workers in her community.

Durgadevi's involvement with the TNDWWT and the training on domestic workers' rights has empowered her to improve her working conditions and advocate for fair treatment. Her efforts have led to tangible changes in her life and have benefited other domestic workers in her community.



*"After joining the domestic workers' union, I have gained a better understanding of my rights, I now feel more empowered to negotiate with employers and ensure that I am treated fairly."*

Rebeka, aged 33, has been residing in Kannagi Nagar for 20 years, having previously lived in Teynampet. She has been working as a domestic worker for 12 years, managing two households and earning Rs. 7500 monthly on a part-time basis. Rebeka has a daughter studying in the 3rd standard and a son in the 7th standard. Her husband works as a plumber, earning around Rs. 8000 monthly on a daily wage basis.

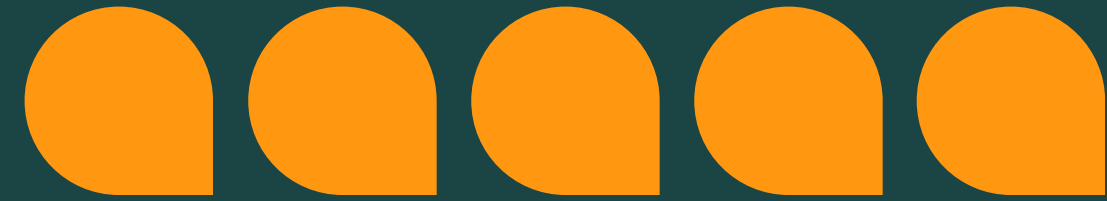
Rebeka has been a member of the domestic workers' union for 6 years. Before joining the union, it was difficult for her to find proper job opportunities. However, through the union, she has networked with many people who recommend work and ensure fair wages. Rebeka has also become more outgoing, transitioning from an introvert to someone who actively engages with others.

The union has had a transformative impact on Rebeka's life. She now has a better understanding of her rights as a domestic worker, including the right to weekly leave and at least two days off per month. She is also more empowered to negotiate fair wages and working conditions.

One specific impact of the union is that Rebeka no longer encourages other domestic workers to accept jobs that pay less than fair wages. This has helped create a more equitable working environment for domestic workers in her community. Rebeka's increased confidence and advocacy have not only benefited her but also other domestic workers, ensuring they are treated fairly and respectfully.



*"My life was comparatively better, I gained confidence and became independent"*



Ambika, aged 48, has been residing in Kannagi Nagar for 9 years. She previously worked as a domestic worker in Sowcarpet, Paris, commuting daily from Ezhil Nagar. Ambika has 5 children and recently started a petty shop in Ezhil Nagar to supplement her income, earning between INR 5000 to INR 9000 monthly. Ambika's family faces financial challenges due to her debts, despite her efforts to increase her income through the petty shop.

Ambika attended a consultation and leadership training organized by the Tamilnadu Domestic Workers Welfare Trust (TNDWWT). The consultation and leadership training have provided Ambika with valuable skills and knowledge to manage her petty shop and improve her financial situation.

One specific impact of the training is that Ambika has gained the confidence and skills to manage her petty shop more efficiently. This has helped her increase her income and better manage her debts, improving her family's financial stability.

In conclusion, Ambika's involvement with TNDWWT has empowered her to take control of her financial situation and improve her livelihood. The training she received has equipped her with the skills and confidence to manage her petty shop successfully, contributing to her family's well-being.



*"With the help of TNDWWT, I was able to start garments business, which has provided my family with an additional income of Rs. 200-250 per day, helping us overcome financial crises and afford a basic lifestyle."*

Vennila, aged 35, has been living in Ezhil Nagar for 8 years with her husband, Suresh, aged 36, who works as a daily wage laborer. They have three daughters who are studying in middle school. Vennila has been working as a domestic worker for 7 years, earning Rs. 2500 per month for 3 hours of work per day. Vennila's family faced financial difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to verbal abuse from her husband due to his alcohol consumption. They lived in a rented house with a monthly rent of Rs. 4500.

With the help of the Tamilnadu Domestic Workers Welfare Trust (TNDWWT), Vennila planned to start a small business in her home by buying wholesale garment materials (Blouse bits, dress materials, etc). She eventually started this garments business, earning a profit of Rs. 200-250 per day. The support from TNDWWT has had a significant impact on Vennila's life. The new business venture has provided her with an additional source of income, helping her family overcome financial crises and afford a basic lifestyle.

The garment business has improved Vennila's financial situation and has also provided her with a sense of empowerment and independence. She no longer has to rely solely on her husband's income, reducing the financial strain on the family.

The support from TNDWWT has helped Vennila establish a successful business, improving her family's financial stability and overall well-being. The support has empowered her to take control of her economic situation and provide a better future for her children.



*"The support and guidance provided by TNDWWT have had a tangible impact on my life."*

Meet Kaviya, aged 28, lives in Ezhil Nagar in a rented house, paying Rs. 2000 monthly rent. She relocated 9 years ago from Valluvar Kottam, Nungambakkam. Kaviya has been working as a part-time domestic worker for 4 years, earning Rs. 3500 initially, with a recent increment bringing her monthly salary to Rs. 4000. Kaviya has a daughter, Arshika, aged 6, studying in the 1st standard and a son, Sai Harish, aged 4. Her husband was employed as an Apollo medical deliverer but met with an accident months ago, which left him unemployed.

Kaviya attended skill training sessions and legal rights awareness programs organized by TNDWWT. These programs made her aware of her rights as a domestic worker and empowered her to negotiate better terms with her employer. The skill training and legal rights awareness programs have had a significant impact on Kaviya's life. She became more aware of her rights and learned to measure her working hours accurately. After attending the training, she negotiated with her employer for a salary increment, showcasing her increased bargaining capacity.

Kaviya's increased awareness and negotiation skills have resulted in a positive change in her working conditions. The salary increment she secured has improved her financial situation, especially given her husband's unemployment due to the accident. She is now better equipped to provide for her family and ensure a brighter future for her children.



*"Domestic workers are at the core of our families, our economy, and our society. They deserve respect, dignity, and fair treatment." - **Hillary Clinton***

*"Domestic workers are not just employees; they are caregivers, nurturers, and often the unsung heroes of our homes. Their work is invaluable, and we must ensure they are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve." - **Kamala Harris***

*"Domestic workers play a vital role in our society, often working long hours for low pay and little recognition. We must strive for fair wages, safe working conditions, and respect for all workers, regardless of their occupation." - **Bernie Sanders***

*"The hands that rock the cradle should be celebrated, respected, and fairly compensated. Domestic workers are the backbone of our households and communities." - **Dolores Huerta***

*"The work of domestic workers is the work that makes all other work possible." - **Ai-jen Poo***





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