



Hetal: Caring for Others at Home and at Work

Hetal Laileshbai Kishori does double duty, caring for others at home and at work. She moved to Ahmedabad city 15 years ago from another district of Gujarat. She subsequently built a home for her 15-member household, which includes her two children, who are seven and four.

About three years ago, Hetal became a domestic worker to earn money. To make this possible, she joined the Self Employed Women's Association ([SEWA](#)) so she could enrol her youngest child in the local Balsewa child care centre.



Photo: WIEGO

Domestic work is undervalued because it is considered “women’s work” – an extension of a woman’s (unpaid) caring responsibilities at home.

SEWa is a trade union for informal women workers and its Balsewa child care centres were established to fill a gap in the provision of child care facilities for its members. Today there are 33 in the state of Gujarat, including 13 in the city of Ahmedabad. Each runs as a cooperative, employing an innovative model that takes a holistic approach that caters to both the mental and physical needs of the child.

Hetal says that since joining SEWA and enrolling her youngest son at the centre a year ago, she knows she can complete her work with peace of mind while her child is well cared for and given nutritious food.

She is also reassured because she knows that the centre is helping to prepare him properly for school by providing early childhood development. The walls of the local Balsewa are covered with letters, numbers and symbols, and her child has now started to talk and to recognize these.

Doing double duty

The flexible hours of domestic work make it easier for women to juggle their work responsibilities outside the home with their caring responsibilities in the home. The nature of this work is also flexible in that it allows these women to choose the number of households they want to work for. Hetal works for three and half hours per day, seven days per week, for two households, earning 3,000 rupees (US \$46.50¹) per month.

Most of the tasks involved in the job are relatively standard across households. They include sweeping and mopping floors, dusting surfaces, laundering clothes (usually by hand), and washing up after the evening meal. But for Hetal, there is some caring work involved. She looks after an elderly person in one of her households, helping him to draw water for his bath, serving him food when he is hungry and assisting him if he wants to sit outside.

Domestic workers like Hetal provide critical services – and their work makes it possible for other wealthier women and men to go out and earn an income. Nonetheless, the work is undervalued because it is considered “women’s work” – an extension of a woman’s (unpaid) caring responsibilities at home. There is little opportunity to negotiate better wages or government recognition. While the local Balsewa makes it possible for Hetal to go out to work, her low wages limit what she can do for her children and household.

However, Hetal is fortunate to have the support of her extended family, which can help domestic workers manage their dual paid and unpaid care responsibilities. Hetal’s in-laws live with her and assist by preparing the morning food and getting the children ready for school, while she does the dishes and the mopping.

¹ Currency conversion based on the mid-market rate of June 1, 2017 found at www.xe.com: 1 rupee = .0155 US dollars.

Finding strength for a better future

Earning an income as a domestic worker can help women like Hetal accumulate savings, which they can then use to provide new opportunities and better care for their children and families in the future. But the irony is that the demands of taking on care responsibilities in both paid and personal space can take time and energy away from a woman's ability to care for herself and spend enjoyable time with her family in the present – all while feeling undervalued.

For many domestic workers like Hetal, there is not enough time in the day to participate actively in trade union organizing activities, which could improve her working conditions. Hetal says her primary reason for joining SEWA was to have access to the Balsewa for her child, and she has not had time to attend SEWA meetings.

Yet through trade unions like SEWA and globally through the International Domestic Workers' Federation, domestic workers are finding a voice and demanding recognition, fair wages and better working conditions. These efforts are more remarkable given domestic workers lack both time and resources as they juggle their paid care work and their care responsibilities at home. What they require is support from governments in the form of quality public child care and health care services, alongside decent working conditions.

Earning income as a domestic worker can help women like Hetal accumulate savings, which they can use to provide new opportunities and better care for their children and families.

About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base about the informal economy and influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org.