



Pushpaben: Arduous Days of Domestic Duties

Pushpaben Ishwarbhai Makwana lives with her husband and four children in Ravij Nagar, a bustling suburb in Ahmedabad in India. Five months ago, she took up domestic work because she wanted to be able to support her children's education.

Domestic work is convenient and easy to find. However, it means her days are long and her waking hours are all spent caring for households and families. As a domestic worker, she works seven and half hours each day for five households, bringing home 8,000 rupees (US\$124¹) per month. In her unpaid hours, she cares for her children and husband and their household.



Photo: WIEGO

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

While no particular training or educational achievement is required, domestic work can be physically demanding, taking a toll.

Working outside her home is possible because Pushpaben has access to affordable child care. Her youngest, a boy of one and half, goes to the nearby Balsewa centre. Balsewa centres are run as cooperatives by the Self-Employed Women's Association ([SEWA](#)), a trade union for informal women workers. Pushpaben joined SEWA so she could use the Balsewa near her home, where her son will receive the best in early child development education along with nutritious food every day. For this, she pays 175 rupees every month.

Pushpaben's four year old daughter attends a government-funded Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centre, which is free. However, it is only open between 10am and 4pm, which is less convenient than the longer hours at the Balsewa.

Cost was a constraint. With the expense of her eldest, a 10-year-old, in private school, Pushpaben decided to send only one of her two youngest to the Balsewa. However, she feels that ICDS centres do not offer the same level of developmental stimulation and quality nutrition for children, so she worries her son and daughter do not receive the same quality of childcare.

Flexible but long days

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 working day doesn't start too early – 9am – but Pushpaben is up at 6am to do all her own household work, including cooking the food and washing clothes. She must also get her children ready for their days before she walks to work. In the afternoon, she can fetch her children from child care and school and prepare the evening meal. Then in the evening, normally from 8:30 to 10pm, she might return to an employers' house to do the washing up after the evening meal.

The tasks involved in domestic work are relatively standard across households: sweeping and mopping floors, dusting surfaces, washing clothes (normally by hand), and washing utensils and crockery after the evening meal. While no particular training or educational achievement is required, it is necessary work and can be physically demanding, taking a toll.

However, because this is considered “women's work” it is undervalued. Even working full time, low wages limit the resources Pushpaben has to care for her children and household. So the supports offered by the Balsewa centre are essential, making it possible for her to go out to work.

The local Balsewa child care centre in Rajiv Nagar is one of 13 such centres in operation across the city of Ahmedabad. The centres were pioneered by SEWA in an effort to bridge a gap in services offered

for parents who work in the informal economy. All Balsewa child care centres are run as cooperatives, meaning that both parents and teachers have a stake in their management and success.

Working in pain, without benefits

Pushpaben's long days of combined paid and unpaid work place an enormous strain on her, which no doubt contributes to the pain in her joints, body and hands.

Domestic work, because it is informal, does not come with any social security benefits. Domestic workers generally do not have formal employment contracts, and workers like Pushpaben work seven days a week with no official leave days or holidays. (Even on festival days, her services are needed to ensure her employers homes are spotless and ready for company.)

For Pushpaben the most difficult part is the aching in her joints, body and hands from the repetitive and physical nature of the tasks she performs all day. If she takes time off to go to the doctor, or to rest and recover, then her salary gets cut. If she were to take any extended time off without the security of a contract, she could lose work altogether.

The only days Pushpaben has off work are, then, is the "informal" time-off she enjoys if when one of her employers go away from home.

Despite the physical demands and the strain of juggling domestic work outside the home with caring responsibilities at home, Pushpaben – like many other domestic workers in Rajiv Nagar – perseveres because she knows that the work will help to bring in much needed income for their households and their children's education. This is particularly important to Pushpaben, who did not have the opportunity for a proper education herself and becomes frustrated when she can't sit down and help her children with their homework.

The demands of juggling domestic work outside the home with caring responsibilities in the home leave women like Pushpaben with little time to organize to secure their rights or improve their working conditions. Although Pushpaben knows that SEWA holds meetings to discuss organizing activities for domestic workers, she has not had time to attend.

But organizing is crucial. It defeats the isolation of domestic work and gives women like Pushpaben a voice to articulate their need for government support for both quality public child care and health care services, along with decent working conditions.

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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.