

Without laws in India to protect millions of domestic workers, nor with the impetus of the Supreme Court

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Annie Philip

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"We live in fear that if we take a day off, someone else will replace us. There are other domestic workers who are willing to pay less. Even when we are sick, our employers ask us to come to work and rest afterwards," says Sangeeta M., a 30-year-old domestic worker living in Bangalore, in the southern Indian state of [Karnataka](#) .

Sangeeta is one of the millions of people who make up India's domestic workforce, for whom job insecurity, vulnerability to [abuse](#) , [sexual exploitation](#) and harassment , low wages and poor working conditions are a daily reality.

The fight for their rights has been a years-long odyssey with few results. To date, for example, there isn't even accurate or updated data on how many people are employed in this sector. The government estimated there were [around four million in 2012](#) , and the International Labor Organization (ILO) reported between 20 and 80 million [in 2010](#). [The official portal for unorganized workers](#) has registered approximately 28.9 million domestic and household workers. The government conducted a [national survey of domestic workers](#) in 2024, but the results have not yet been published.

In January of this year, [India's highest court \(the Supreme Court\) ordered](#) the government to establish an inter-ministerial committee (including the Ministries of Labor, Social Justice, Women and Child Development, and Law and Justice) to examine the possibility of enacting a centralized law [protecting the rights of domestic workers](#) . The court gave the committee six months to submit a report. The deadline has passed, and there has been no news from the committee or the report.



Domestic workers during the celebration of International Domestic Workers' Day in Bangalore, India, on June 16, 2025.

Geeta Menon, co-founder of Stree Jagruti Samiti, has been working for the rights of domestic workers in India for several decades. She says the court recognized the connection between [child trafficking, exploitation, and placement](#) as domestic workers, and that this was the reason for its order to create legal protections. In [its ruling](#) , the court expressed concern about “the lack of regulation of this critical labor sector” and noted that “the legal vacuum that exists regarding the rights and protections of domestic workers” is the cause of “the widespread harassment and abuse” experienced by this sector. It added that “in many cases, they endure low wages, unsafe environments, and long working hours with no real recourse.” The NGO is exploring ways for members of the Domestic Workers Rights Union to serve on the court-mandated committee.

Since 1959, there have been attempts to enact laws designed exclusively for the welfare of domestic workers—one of the most recent attempts was in 2017—but none have materialized. Although these workers are included in the [Unorganized Workers' Social](#)

[Security Act of 2008](#) , and some states have passed measures to improve their welfare, minimum guarantees are still lacking. While some regions have mandated their inclusion under the Minimum Wage Act of 1948, wage calculations have not been done scientifically, Menon asserts. “It doesn't match the complexity and the tasks defined. For every explicit task, they may perform five more that aren't accounted for. What we propose is a criterion so that everyone is paid the same. And it should be mandatory,” she maintains.



Geeta Menon, founder of the Stree Jagruti Samiti organization, on June 14, 2025.

On the other hand, although the government assured [in 2023 that the new labor legislation](#) guaranteed "decent working conditions, wages, protection, grievance mechanisms, and other social security benefits for all categories of workers, including domestic workers," it [has not yet entered into force](#) .

A law tailored to a complex profession

One of the specific features the law should address, according to the sources consulted, is properly defining and regulating the workplace. For the employer, the home is their private space, while for the domestic worker, it is their workplace. Labor Ministry officials are reluctant to enforce regulations and conduct inspections in private homes, Menon explains.

This complexity prevents real redress even in cases of sexual harassment of domestic workers, despite their protection under the Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (POSH) Act of 2013. Homeowners' associations of residential buildings act swiftly if the perpetrator is an outsider, such as an electrician, for example; but they are reluctant when it's a resident, says Menon.

Another key problem is that domestic work, including care work, is undervalued. "All jobs have a name. Ours has no identity. People look down on domestic work. It should be recognized," says Sangeeta, who is also one of the leaders of the Domestic Workers' Rights Union.

Other demands include sick leave, one day off a week, and scholarships for our children.

Sumitra Paswan, domestic worker and leader of a workers' group

Among other demands, the union is calling for a working group with a dedicated helpline, a welfare council with the participation of domestic workers and unions, a redress mechanism, a benefits plan, legal regulation of employment agencies, and accident insurance.

These are the same concerns being heard in the city of Guwahati, in the eastern state of Assam. "We are getting older. We can't keep working forever," says Sumitra Paswan, 56, who has been a domestic worker for three decades in Uzanbazar, Guwahati. Paswan is the local representative of Grihokarmi Adhikar Suraksha Samiti (GASS), an association of domestic workers in Assam. "We have long been asking the government to create some kind of pension scheme for domestic workers. Other demands include sick leave, one day off per week, and scholarships for the children of domestic workers," she says.

Paswan emphasizes the need for workers to organize. "I try to make it clear to other women. This is our job, and it's an issue that affects our well-being," she explains. GASS played a key role, along with Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action, in drafting a [state domestic workers' rights bill](#) that addressed redress mechanisms, dispute resolution, and penalties for violations, as well as the creation of a welfare fund. The bill was withdrawn in March 2023 after expressing confidence that the government would take their suggestions into account.

Steps towards legal protection

The feudal mentality has impeded progress in the achievement of rights. Domestic work evolved from a system of servitude.

Geeta Menon, member of the Stree Jagruti Samiti organization

A first step toward achieving a centralized law would be for India to ratify [ILO Convention 189 on domestic workers](#), signed in 2011, a demand put forward by the Bangalore Domestic Workers Rights Union during the commemoration of International Domestic Workers Day on June 16, 2025. The convention obliges member countries to guarantee fair and decent working conditions for domestic workers.

Menon's organization and others have jointly filed a Public Interest Petition with the Supreme Court with two main demands: that the Minimum Wage Act be enforced in states that do not yet have one, and that the role and responsibility of Resident Welfare Associations be increased.

Another obstacle is domestic workers' awareness of their work. The circumstances in which they work—a multi-member family—make it difficult for them to refuse or negotiate, unlike garment factory workers, who can demand overtime pay when asked to do tasks that aren't their responsibility, Menon explains. "The worker herself doesn't consider it productive work because she feels it's the same thing she does at home," she adds. Domestic workers don't want to complain about the minimum wage because they know that if they do, they will be replaced. Therefore, unions and organizations working in this sector must work hard to convince them of the value of their work and the need to defend their rights.

According to [several studies](#), the widespread idea in Indian society that "women are conditioned to be caregivers" and that domestic work is "unskilled labor," coupled with the role of castes (hereditary social classes), contributes to domestic labor being underpaid and undervalued. "The feudal mentality has impeded progress in the achievement of rights. Domestic work evolved from a system of servitude. Although the wage economy developed and transformed the situation into a relationship between employer and employee, the mentality has not changed. Domestic workers are still considered serfs," says Menon.