Study on the Professionalization of Domestic Work in Kerala

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Foreword and Acknowledgments

This study is an attempt to analyze the professionalization of domestic work in Kerala. Considering domestic work as a growing field of employment of women in the unorganized sector it is intended to look at the aspects of professionalization of the service through the experiences of SEWA which has developed a system to professionalize the service. A documentation of the history of SEWA was attempted in order to understand the process in detail. To substantiate the process 25 domestic workers who are trained through the organization and 25 workers who are not trained are interviewed to understand their perceptions on work and professionalization. Their responses are analyzed towards a valuable argument on professionalization. We have identified many recruitment agencies in and around Trivandrum and compared their functioning.

Nalini Nayak went through all the documents of SEWA and prepared a detailed documentation of the activities. Sheena Bashir interviewed the women members and generated the tables. She has also collected the information on agencies. All the women who are trained and untrained have participated very earnestly in the process.

Thanks to all who have involved in this short but a significant study on professionalization of domestic work in Kerala. We present this with the anticipation of generating discussions on developing the skills of domestic workers towards professionalization.

Sonia George
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SECTION 1

1.1 Introduction

One of the growing areas for employment for women in Kerala today is in the sector of domestic work. This indispensable service that these workers provide to the daily life and regeneration of society remains invisible. To date there is no reliable data on the number of domestic workers although the NSS 2005 put it down as 4.75 million, it could easily be around 10 million today. As domestic work features as an employment category in the present census, and if women themselves declare themselves as domestic workers, there is a possibility that we will get reliable data on this sector in the future.

Although large populations of domestic workers come from vulnerable communities and backward areas in Kerala, they seem to cut across all communities. As domestic work is undervalued and poorly regulated, many domestic workers remain overworked, underpaid and unprotected. Many are maltreated, exploited, ill-treated and suffer violence. Many are sexually abused. The domestic workers may also include child domestic workers, in spite of the Government banning the utilization of services of child workers below 14 years of age in any domestic work. In Kerala, except for certain districts in north Kerala where they are migrants, the majority of domestic workers are locals. They may work in one or more homes on a part time or full time basis or even as live-in workers.

Cognizant of the fact that domestic work is a growing employment sector which remains unregulated and thereby exploitative, certain organizations like the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) and the Red Cross attempted to organize such workers and professionalize domestic services with the hope that such workers would get their legitimate rights as workers while at the same time being backed by an organization that provides a sense of social security. This was a conscious process not only to bring dignity to a work that is indispensable in our society but to also see that such workers, who are for the most part poor women, also get recognized and get their due as workers. The initial service provided was the care of the sick and this further developed into more specialized caring services and gradually also moved to other
areas of service like cleaning and cooking. Interestingly, this had a domino effect with the mushrooming of placement agencies/agents/brokers all providing ‘home nurses’ and ‘servants’ while some are simultaneously real estate agents or run retail outlets. Several women in search of work are caught in this trap.

In the last few years there has been a growing awareness worldwide on the need to consider domestic work as work and to regulate it. This finally materialized in a Special Committee in the ILO that led to developing a Standard for Decent Work for Domestic Workers. In its 99th Session of the ILC in June 2010 and subsequently in the 100th session in 2011 the Convention 189 for Decent Work for Domestic workers was voted in.

In the wake of this international development the Government of India, under pressure from some of the trade unions, initiated a process to look into these issues and to consider the best strategy to safeguard the rights of these workers. The Government of Kerala is presently one of the five states in India that has scheduled domestic work, established a minimum wage and has included domestic workers in some welfare schemes. This nevertheless does not regulate domestic work and neither does it assure this section of workers their legitimate rights as workers.

The GOI has also passed the Act for Social Security for the Unorganized Sector in 2008. Unfortunately this Act, while highlighting the importance of this sector and the need to extend it social protection, finally only extended a few social welfare schemes for the workers. Over 90% of the workforce is in the unorganized sector. It is imperative for government to be forward looking and develop institutional mechanisms to protect the dignity and welfare of such work and the workers.

In this light, this study proposes to analyze and document how a group of domestic women workers, have been able, in small measure, to achieve this end and how the state could take this forward. It is intended that the documenting of this good practice, may lead to larger policy recommendations so that this large section of the labour force can make its contribution to society visible.
1.1.1 Professionalization of domestic services

There are many attempts made internationally and nationally to professionalize the services of domestic workers. This is a conscious attempt made to make this work acceptable in the mainstream society thereby valuing the contributions made by these workers. SEWA and the Red Cross are two organizations that spearheaded the professionalization process. Following this the ILO and the Delhi government have now introduced a training for the professionalization of domestic work where they are training (3 months) domestic workers and providing them a certificate. The National Skill Development Corporation is presently deciding on the curriculum and also developing training modules to professionalize the service of the domestic workers and certify them.

1.1.2 The objectives of this study are to:

- Assess the advantages and disadvantages of such Professionalization from the point of securing rights of workers in the unorganized sector
- Analyze the role of the different kinds of placement agencies in enhancing or exploiting the section of the workforce
- Highlight the role of the State in safeguarding the rights and social security of the domestic workers

1.1.3 Main Research questions:

- How do domestic workers benefit from professionalizing their services
- To what extent does the organization of such workers strengthen their right to decent work and safeguard their rights
- What kinds of placement agencies enhance the workers rewards or exploit them
- What is the role of the state in safeguarding the rights of such workers in the unorganized sector

1.2 Methodology

This study intended to look at the experiences of both the Red Cross Society based in Kottayam and SEWA based in Trivandrum that commenced at similar times rendering similar services.
Unfortunately, the Red Cross was very reluctant to share any information on the claim that their involvement in this area was substantially reduced. Repeated attempts to get information from the Red Cross did not succeed as the management refused to cooperate. Hence only a very brief historical background of the origin and functioning of the Red Cross is given.

This is basically a qualitative study. It adopts a two pronged approach. It documents the oral and recorded history of SEWA through its founders, members and staff, the records of the general body and committee meetings and other important meetings of the organization. This is a detailed narrative of the formation and purpose of the organization, the significant changes that took place and its structure and functioning. It also endeavors to document how the professionalization of services has benefited the workers and met client needs vis a vis those workers who have not been trained. This was undertaken through detailed interviews. 25 workers each from the trained and untrained categories were interviewed to understand how they coped with their work, their own self confidence and awareness of their rights and how they link their work with family responsibilities. 15 clients who avail of services for long periods through SEWA were also interviewed to get their opinion about the services and also their attitude towards domestic work. The selection of the respondents was not through scientific random sampling, but through a stratified selection based on the service provided – nursing, cleaning or cooking- and then from the point of view of the economic and geographic location of the clients – the idea being to get as wide a representation as possible and taking into consideration the availability of the respondents.

There has been a serious attempt to interview as many placement agencies as possible or to list them and their operational styles vis a vis the workers. Agencies were identified and their manner of functioning ascertained through phone calls and meetings for service hiring and from the workers themselves.

As the international and national governmental processes on developing standards for domestic workers are presently in motion, this study also documents these processes highlighting the role of the state in legislating for such workers and make policy recommendations.
2.1 Professionalization of domestic work

Domestic work is generally considered an extension of house work which women do ‘naturally’. Hence like all household work it is taken for granted. While not discussing this patriarchal discrimination in undervaluing such life sustaining work, we focus here on domestic work that is done for remuneration. As such work is generally rendered by people who have no other training or skills, but a work that is increasingly in demand by a class of people who may have different expectations of the worker, there are many attempts made internationally and nationally to professionalize the services of domestic workers.

Professionalization is the social process by which any trade or occupation transforms itself into a true “profession of the highest integrity and competence.” This process tends to involve establishing acceptable qualifications, a professional body or association to oversee the conduct of members of the profession and some degree of demarcation of the qualified from unqualified amateurs. This creates “a hierarchical divide between the knowledge-authorities in the professions and a deferential citizenry.” This demarcation is often termed “occupational closure”, as it means that the profession then becomes closed to entry from outsiders, amateurs and the unqualified: a stratified occupation “defined by professional demarcation and grade.” The origin of this process is said to have been with guilds during the Middle Ages, when they fought for exclusive rights to practice their trades as journeymen, and to engage unpaid apprentices.

1 Nilsson, Henrik (undated). “Professionalism, Lecture 5. What is a Profession?”(PDF). University of Nottingham, Archived from the original on 2007-09-26
2 http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/conservatism.htm. What is Conservatism and What is wrong with it? Philip E Agre, August 2004
4 http://careerfocus.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/328/7431/s19Rhona Macdonald, The Hospital at Night, British Medical Jnl, 2004
The professionalization process tends to establish the group norms of conduct and qualification of members of a profession and tends also to insist that members of the profession achieve “conformity to the norm” and abide more or less strictly with the established procedures and any agreed code of conduct, which is policed by professional bodies, for “accreditation assures conformity to general expectations of the profession.”

A profession usually has a professional association, ethical code and process of certification or licensing. The typical functions developed by professional bodies generally are:

- setting standards of education and experience that must be met by its members
- accreditation of e.g. university courses that are judged to meet these standards to facilitate entry
- establishing a code of conduct to regulate how members behave in their professional lives

2.1.1 Characteristics common to many professional associations are:

- substantial education and training required
- the members of the profession themselves decide the nature of the training and control entry to the profession
- the profession is organized into one or more professional bodies
- the profession lays down standards of conduct with which its members must comply.
- establishing mechanisms for disseminating knowledge of good practice to its members
- advising government and regulatory bodies about matters within its area of expertise

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All professional bodies have codes of conduct and/or practice that their members must obey:

Code of Conduct: Outwards looking, governs relationship between members and society as a whole. Example: for a domestic worker, “In your professional role you shall respect the privacy of the home you are working in.”

Code of Practice: Inwards looking, governs how to practice the profession. Example: for the domestic worker, “you shall be trustworthy and not steal”

Code of Conduct in the Public Interest: Professional duties should be carried out with “due care and diligence”.

Members are required to be aware of and comply with relevant laws and regulations.

Besides this there are also obligations to the Relevant Authority (employers, client, and agency).

Namely to

- Avoid conflicts of interest.
- Avoid misrepresentation.
- Avoid passing on confidential information.

Duty to the Profession: namely how to behave to uphold the good reputation of the profession in general.

- Keep up professional skills.
- Follow code of practice.

In the case of domestic workers, a work that has been taken for granted and whose value has been undervalued, professionalization is the process of standardizing the delivery of service, achieving dignity, recognition and respect of the workers by those who receive the service. Through improving skills and developing a code of practice, professional organizations of domestic workers seek to ensure this to the workers and employers. Gone are the days when the
rich and poor lived in close proximity and it was possible for the better off to induct a poor neighbour to render domestic help. Urban spaces get increasingly impersonal on the one hand and the insulation of nuclear families together with both husband and wife having to work, increasingly necessitates help to meet family caring needs. Professional organizations of domestic workers have tried to match the need for livelihood with the demand for service. As family needs are on the increase for specific services, a certain amount of specialization has also been developed in the process of professionalization. For instance, the common demands are for cooking and cleaning or washing of utensils in households. Even in the case of such services, with the increase in cooking and cleaning gadgets and the materials for cooking and cleaning that poor workers have not been exposed to, training the workers to work in modern homes has become a necessity. Besides this there are more specialized services like the care of the old, care of the sick, care of children or post natal care that are all delivered in the home and thereby require a domestic worker. All these services therefore require skill and a code of conduct that a service provider should be able to assure a client.

Minimum wages for domestic workers are calculated on the grounds that it is unskilled work. Nevertheless, with development of skills and the ability to render more professional services, the wages of the workers should also be increased according to the skill available. Timings of work and the kind of service that will be provided can thus also be clearly defined.

In the area of domestic work, it must be recognized that there may not be great uniformity. Households themselves vary in the way they are physically built and humanly managed. Expectations of employers are also not uniform. From the workers point of view, like in any other profession, they are of different characters, abilities and levels of intelligence. Hence the delivery of service also varies and since such work is unorganized, it is very difficult to closely monitor and evaluate. Employer satisfaction is about the only means of assessment and here too since employers have varied expectations and relate to the workers in different ways, it is difficult to generalize satisfaction levels. Hence reaching a common level of professionalization is also not an easy task.

In the Kerala context, the main aspects of professionalism that can be considered requirements are;
• Knowledge of the job to be done
• Punctuality at work
• Good personal hygiene
• Using a uniform
• Respecting the privacy of the home
• Being honest and diligent in one’s work

Professional organizations therefore would focus on the training and supervision of the workers and see that both the clients and workers are happy with the work and conditions of work.

At its meeting in 2008, the Governing Body of the International Labour Organization decided that it would work towards Decent Work for Domestic Workers. This led the ILO to prepare a body of information on domestic work from around the world. This process also led to labour departments and interested organization all over the world to focus on this sector of workers. Organizations of domestic workers around the world created a network to lobby for their cause. Finally at the ILC of 2011, the majority nations of the world voted in Convention 189 for domestic workers together with Recommendations 201 detailing how such a convention could be put into place in the nation states. At this time, the Ministry of Labour and Employment in India set up a Task Force to seriously look in to this subject. The draft policy seeks to define domestic work and work out measure for its recognition, and social protection. The working documents recognize the services of SEWA and Red Cross as two organizations that spearheaded the professionalization process. Following this the ILO and the Delhi government have now introduced the professionalization course where they are training (3 months) domestic workers and providing them a certificate. The National Skill Development Corporation is also deciding on the curriculum and developing training modules to professionalize the service of the domestic workers and issue certificates for the trained workers.
3.1 Recognizing domestic workers as workers and legislating for them

3.1.1 Brief history of the legislation processes

Since 1948 itself, there were various attempts to legislate for domestic workers in the country as domestic workers were not protected under the scope of labor laws. According to the Trade Union Act of 1926 the home could not be considered a workplace or ‘industry’ to which the Act referred. Therefore several attempts were made to legislate for this sector. A Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill (a private members’ bill introduced in the Rajya Sabha) was drafted as early as 1959 but was never enacted. This Bill, together with the All India Domestic Servants Bill that was introduced in the Lok Sabha provided for a minimum wage, maximum hours of work, a weekly day of rest, 15 days annual leave with wages, casual leave, and maintenance of a register of domestic workers by the local police. In 1972 and 1977 two further private member bills [Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill, 1972 and the Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill, 1977] were introduced in the Lok Sabha, that provided Industrial Disputes Act would extend to domestic workers. These Bills lapsed with the dissolution of the Lok Sabha.

The House Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill of 1989 and a similar bill introduced in 1990 were not enacted either. The National Commission on Self Employed women and women in the Informal Sector in 1988 recommended a system of registration for domestic workers. It felt that in view of the existing trends of exploitation, it was extremely important to fix a minimum wage, and to enact a legislation to regulate conditions of employment, social security and security of employment.

In more recent times various organizations of domestic workers all over the country have begun to take up the cause of these workers as they are often harassed and are badly treated. Sr. Jeanne

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6 Dr. Kamala Sankaran, et al.; paper prepared for WIEGO India Law Project, 2009
Devos, a Christian nun who had a background in a worker’s movement, took the first initiative to organize domestic workers to offset this harassment in the 1980s. Over time this grew to be the National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM). A vicious network of middle men and agents had developed in the process – supplying labour but coming under no regulations.

The importance of regulation in relation to domestic work surfaced again in the mid 2000s when issues of trafficking and migration for domestic work came to the notice of the then Chairperson of the National Women’s Commission Dr. Malini Bhattacharyya. Women from the tribal areas of Orissa, Chattisgarh and Bihar were being brought to Delhi and being ill treated. Agents were making quick money with this trade of workers. Dr. Malini Bhattacharyya, as member of the NWC, called a meeting in order to see how this could be managed and regulated. Various people who had shown concern about this trafficking of women for domestic work were invited. The Nirmala Niketan Cooperative made up of a few of such rescued workers was also on board. While the NCW was concerned about bringing the placement agencies under book, Nirmala Niketan was of the opinion that placement agencies could be regulated only if both workers and the employers were registered which could be done only if a Bill was set in motion. Subsequently, the NCW got groups together and a national platform was created to develop a bill. Several organisations of domestic workers, including the NDWM, were on the platform and they drafted a bill with all their inputs assisted by Ms. Meena Patil. The final outcome was the Domestic Workers (Registration, Social Security and Welfare) Bill, 2008. This was a comprehensive bill that sought to establish a registration procedure for all domestic workers, including part-time and full-time workers. The bill also proposed the setting up of a domestic workers Welfare fund to which workers and employers have to contribute, and also deal with registration of service providers, regulation of working conditions and for imprisonment and fines by way of punishment for violation of the provisions of the bill. Central and state level boards were also to be set up for administering the law.

In early 2000, the discussion of the Second Labour Commission took up the issue of the workers in the unorganized sector. Members of SEWA played an important role in the various working groups of this Commission. Nalini Nayak from SEWA Kerala was a member of the working group on the Umbrella Legislation for the Unorganised Workers. Several people’s movements
in the country were highlighting the need for a legislation to safeguard the rights of the unorganized sector workers. But that was also the time when the country was getting entrenched into the neo liberal policies of globalization and making drastic changes in the labour laws of the country that mainly affected the work security of workers of the organized sector. The central trade unions therefore opposed the conclusions of the Second Labour Commission but both the government and the employers organizations were committed to the changes thereby striking a fatal blow to organized labour. In their struggle to uphold the gains of the organized workforce which is only around 4% of the labour force in the country, the mainstream unions failed to see the struggles of the 94% of the unorganized labour force as one continuum whereby the discussions of the Second Labour Commission could have had more teeth and resulted in a more balanced and creative deal for the working class in the country at large.

At the international level, in 2000 the UN Human Rights Commission declared domestic workers as a form of contemporary slavery. At the state levels, several small initiatives towards ensuring protection for the domestic workers had been taken. Tamilnadu included domestic workers in the Tamil Nadu manual Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Work) Act, 1982, in 2007 and the Tamil Nadu domestic Workers welfare Board was constitute in the same year. In 2008, Maharashtra published a Code of Conduct relating to domestic workers and then the Maharashtra Welfare Act for Domestic Workers.

Most of the draft laws discussed above prohibit employment of children below the age of 14 years as domestic workers. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 was amended in 2006 to ban the employment of children below the age of 14 years as domestic workers. The states of Kerala and Karnataka have adopted minimum wage laws for domestic workers. The Government of Madhya Pradesh developed schemes for domestic workers in 2010.

Seeing the menace that the labour contractors were causing in Kerala, SEWA felt that they needed to be regulated and this could only be done by bringing the whole sector under a legislative framework. SEWA created a draft Bill in 2002 which it submitted to the Labour Ministry in Kerala as the then Labour Secretary was concerned about the plight of these workers. But due to a change in portfolios and later in the Government itself, this Bill was shelved and did not see the light of day.
Despite the fact that the Unorganised Social Security Act was passed in 2008, this was merely a welfare act and provided no means to regulate work in this sector. Hence several organizations of domestic workers began to agitate for a legislation to protect the rights of these workers as their numbers also swelled.

Things began to hot up when the International Labour Conference at the ILO decided to take up discussion in 2010 regarding an international instrument for Decent Work for Domestic Workers. In preparation for this discussion the ILO prepared a substantial amount of material on the issue, collected whatever statistics were available, documented good practices around the world and began to inform the 183 Member states and the social partners of the issues so that they could prepare for the ILC discussions. Fortunately that year, SEWA was included in the Government delegation of Trade Unions and Nalini Nayak was deputed to participate in the Committee that discussed this draft Convention. In that year the government of India was totally opposed to discussing a Convention and asked only for a Recommendation. It was a great pity to see India take such an anti labour position when millions of poor Indian women depend on domestic work for a livelihood. Nevertheless, all the unions, particularly SEWA and the National Domestic Workers Movement and the BMS created a hue and cry when they returned to India. Since such discussions normally take place for two years in succession, the government of India finally changed its mind and voted for the Convention in 2011 although the Indian Employers delegate voted against it.

Nevertheless, the Convention was voted in by 396 votes with 16 against and 63 abstentions. The Recommendations were voted in by 434 votes, 8 against and 42 abstentions. Hence June 16, 2011, is a historical day for the domestic workers as the ILC decided to vote in Convention 189, Decent Work for Domestic Workers accompanied by Recommendations 201.

One must say this historical event was made possible because of the huge lobby of the domestic workers themselves in Geneva that were mobilized internationally by several support organizations. The International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) was supported by the IUF – an international food and allied workers union based in Geneva and Women in the Informal
Economy Globalizing and Organising (WIEGO). SEWA being a founder member of WIEGO was also a member of the IDWN. The IDWN was led by domestic workers themselves and WIEGO and the IUF managed to help this network have a voice of their own at the ILC proceedings. The other factor that made for the success was the able representation of the workers made by Ms. Haleema Yakoob who was the spokesperson of the workers. She stood out for her precision and commitment to the cause. Several governments had also done their homework well and were able to defend their positive positions against the employers association who from day one were opposed to this Convention.

3.1.2 Convention 189

The Convention defines the domestic worker as **one who works in or for a household and where there is an employment relationship**. These workers can be local, migrant, working in one or many homes every day or some days a week but on a regular basis for a livelihood.

The Convention recognises that the domestic workers have rights like all other workers – right to collectively bargain, minimum wages and social protection and also that they are protected under other Conventions like freedom from forced labour, freedom from child labour and elimination from all forms of discrimination.

As the Convention opposes child labour it also recommends that all domestic workers are assisted to complete basic education up to the age of 18 years.

The Convention stipulates that the workers must be informed of their terms of employment and in cases of the migrant workers particularly that they should have a written contract in a language they understand stating the name and address of the employer, kind of job, remuneration and manner of payment, accommodation, leave and other benefits and repatriation details. The Convention also specifies that the domestic workers should be permitted to keep the travel documents in their possession while working abroad.

The Convention makes special mention of the placement agencies that will be required to register and hence can be monitored. Now that the Convention has been voted in, it will come into operation when two countries ratify it. It will become binding in India only when India
It is only if India ratifies this Convention that the rights of these workers will actually be protected both within and outside the country.

3.1.3 At the National level

While the draft Bill for Domestic workers remained in the hands of the National Women’s Commission, the discussion at the international level also forced things to move within the Labour Ministry in Delhi. Towards the end of 2009 the Central Ministry of Labour and Employment, created a Task Force to address the issue of the domestic workers. In the Task Force the initial focus was on extending social protection to domestic workers after which the regulation of work would be looked into. So as early as March of 2010, the government of India decided to include domestic workers in the health insurance programme called the Rashtriya Swasth Bhima Yojana (RSBY). This focus was taken because the head of the Task Force, Mr. Anil Swaroop, one of the Deputy Governor Generals of the Ministry of Labour, was the brain behind the RSBY and which had taken off in a very positive way in the country. Through this scheme, the workers were registered, received a smart card that is recognized anywhere in the country for medical assistance in hospitals that are registered under this scheme. For this the workers only need to pay Rs. 30 for the smart card and have to reregister every year. It provides them and four other members in the family for cover up to Rs.35,000 a year and in case of serious illness up to Rs.75,000 a year. It was also foreseen that the issuing of the smart card for domestic workers would be an indirect means of getting them recognized until such time that the government decided to legislate in their favour. This was indeed a big step forward and for the unions that had already domestic workers as members, it was easy to access the RSBY which also gave the workers their first official social security benefit as workers.

In November 2011, when the work of the Task Force was complete, the Ministry of Labour and Employment finally published its report with the draft National Policy of Domestic Workers. It was decided to focus on a Policy rather than an Act as this is still a sector that is little acknowledged. Pursuing an Act, the Task Force felt, would result in a very toothless legislation/Act at this point. The Policy, on the other hand, was broad based, explanatory and focused on pertinent issues. It also put the onus on the Ministry Of Labour and Employment to
create an Implementation Committee that would develop the framework for the execution of the policy at the state level and suggested that the States implement the policy requirements within 13 months of the Notification of the policy. In this way, the Policy was much focused and had a time line for implementation.

In Kerala where the issues of the unorganized sector workers have been recognized for long and where there are several Welfare Boards that deliver a minimum of social security benefits to workers, the Left Democratic Front ministry of Kerala and the Labour Minister Shri P.K. Gurudasan, who had a trade union background himself, was very open to the recognition of domestic workers as workers. It was during his tenure that the domestic workers were schedule in 2010 and Minimum Wages declared. These were both part time and daily wages accepting that domestic workers could work in several homes at the same time. In 2010 Kerala was the first state in the country to include the domestic workers in the RSBY regardless of being in the BPL or APL categories. When prices rose, the Minister also ordered that the domestic workers have access to the Rs. 2 rice scheme. This was a big benefit to workers when prices otherwise were soaring. Before the Left Front left office in 2011, the Finance Minister Dr. Thomas Isaac announced in his last budget an allocation for the creation of a Welfare Board for Domestic Workers. It is still left to be seen whether the United Democratic Front government will create the Welfare Board for Domestic Workers.

Between 2007-2010, when there was much discussion on the need to prevent violence against women at the workplace, the domestic workers were specifically excluded from the purview of the draft Anti Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Bill. As there seemed to be resistance on the part of some sections, particularly the Ministry of Women and Child, to accept that domestic workers are workers and that this makes the home their work place. All the women’s professionals in the country reacted to this. The NDWM and SEWA made representations to the National Advisory Council to take up this issue. The NAC created a working group to look into this matter and this working group, headed by Ms. Mirai Chatterjee from SEWA, looked into this matter seriously, getting on board several unions that work with domestic workers. As a result,
the NAC sent a letter to the parliamentary Committee to include domestic workers in the ambit of the Act on Sexual Harassment at the workplace and it also urged the government to Ratify Convention 189. It also made a legislative review and indicated how the government of India could facilitate the procedure for ratification without having a specific Act for domestic workers in place as the Government seemed to be considering only a Policy. Finally the Parliamentary Standing Committee organized hearings on the draft Bill and made recommendations among others that domestic workers should be included in the purview of the bill. Finally, in March 2012, this was done.

SEWA has participated actively in these processes and has also taken initiatives to call meetings with other unions in south India to inform them on the contents of the Convention and Draft Policy and to campaign with others for the ratification of the Convention by the Government of India. In December 2011, SEWA took the initiative to call a press conference with other union members of the ITUC to highlight the need for ratification urging the government of India to be one among the first 12 countries to ratify the Convention.

As there is now a greater realization that domestic work is an area in which there is both a growing demand and a means of livelihood for thousands of the urban poor, the National Skill Development Corporation has seen the window of professionalizing such an employment and has also begun to discuss the need for a Skill Development Council for domestic workers. They propose that a training and certification for such workers will get them better wages. The ILO has also developed a module for the professionalization of domestic workers based on initiatives taken in the South East Asian countries. This is more in the lines of training house keepers that find work in more affluent households. Such a training can also be availed of by workers who wish to go abroad where the demand for such services is on the rise. Several other organizations have also begun to train domestic workers.
SECTION 4

4.1 Experiences of Professionalization

4.1.1 Organizations that attempted to professionalize domestic services

There were originally two organizations that attempted to professionalize domestic or personal services in Kerala. Both of them commenced at about the same time, in the mid 1980s, unaware of the other. This was the Red Cross Society based in Kottayam and SEWA based in Trivandrum. It is interesting that both of these organizations commenced their services with care of the old and sick. The narrations below seek to document these attempts and their experiences.

4.1.2 Red Cross Society

Nursing service scheme is a unique project of Indian Red Cross Society, Kottayam Branch, which aims at the training of selected educated and service minded women for rendering nursing care, looking after the aged, sick and bedridden patients. It was introduced in India in 1987, by Sri.K.T.Ouseph, the Honarary Secretary. Discussions with the present secretary indicated that around 3000 nursing assistants were trained every year and they worked in different parts of India. The Red Cross Nursing Scheme has trained more than 25000 women, hundreds of men and their number is increasing progressively on account of new recruitments. Though the scheme was started in a humble way in the year 1988, it grew rapidly and was very popular. The minimum qualification of the workers who sought training was 10th standard for a Red Cross Nurse (RN) and 7th class for Child and maternity care. But over the years several graduates, post graduates, trained nurses and Para medical person joined the services and work in different parts of India.

Initially those that went to work as nurses received a three month training. Now it is reduced to 15 days. The number of women coming to work has been decreasing. Inputs on Nursing, Ayurveda, Physiotherapy and legal information were included in the training module. Those that desire to join the services have to pay a fee of Rs.100 in the beginning thus becoming a member. Trainings and all other expenses are free for the members.
Clients have to pay Rs.3000 to the Society for avail of the service. The female workers get a salary of Rs.6000 and the male workers Rs.6500 a month. The unmarried workers are required to deposit a minimum 50% of their salary in the home nurses’ society and the married women 25%. They get back this money when they leave the institution.

4.1.3 The Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA)

Initial phase – the origins of SEWA

SEWA was registered as a membership organisation of women workers in 1983. The idea grew out of the demand of women at the Women’s day Celebration on March 1982 organised by members of the Programme for Community Organisation (PCO) with women members of the Mahila Samajams (local women’s organisations). These women came from the fishing, agriculture and reed worker communities. All these workers depended on natural resources – fish, land and reeds respectively – for their livelihoods. These women workers, the fisherwomen who sold fish and the women reed workers who actually made the reed mats were challenged by the lack of access to these resources while agricultural work was declining. While they were involved in their trade unions seeking the intervention of the government to safeguard their rights to resources, several of them were also in need of immediate livelihood options. The single mothers particularly needed to be assured of daily earning so that they could keep their home fires burning. They were thus exerting pressure to have some supplementary economic activity.

The PCO team took this up for discussion. In that initial meeting Nalini Nayak explained to the group the need to create an organisation of self employed women based on the model of SEWA, which was also a women’s trade union, as she was inspired by the work and meeting with Mrs. Ela Bhatt. She also said that Ela Bhatt was demanding legislation to meet the needs of women in the unorganised sector and this could happen only if such women workers organised. At that meeting a decision was made to register the organisation with the women members of the mahila samajams who wanted alternative work.  

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8 Report of meeting held on 28th August 1982 – SEWA meeting report book
At the third meeting, there were 30 representatives from the seven mahila samajams. Interestingly at this meeting the women continued to mention the issues they faced at work and that they urgently needed some solutions. They had several suggestions but in general the group decided that in order to create avenues for women, an organisation needed to be formed. It was felt that the organisation should focus on finding work avenues for poor women so that they would have a means of livelihood. At the same time, with their former experience of union work, the women felt that such an organisation should develop a workers consciousness among the members so that existing livelihoods could be sustained. At this meeting the first committee was chosen of 7 women representing different trades and locations when Danamma Paulose a reed worker, was the first President.

The biggest demand of the woman was for alternate employment. Realising that most of the members came from the coastal and reed areas, it was clear that these women were not used to undertaking regular work in a disciplined manner as they were all self-employed and worked as and when they desired. Their existing work was physically difficult and moreover when raw material was in short supply (reeds and fish), they had no work. Hence from such a background, it would be difficult to transform them into wage workers. Moreover, there would be no guarantee that the work would develop high quality products. Several of these women had not left their local communities and all of them had no other skills. They were actually asking for income generation activity in their communities. But it was evident that home based work would require markets and would still not guarantee decent wages to these vulnerable and needy women. Nevertheless, various efforts were made to understand the kinds of home based activity that would be viable.

Between 1983 and 1986, various programmes were attempted to get the women members into alternative work. Various attempts at providing meals, running canteens etc. were tried. One of the canteens also took off well and ran for three years. But the employment in terms of numbers was limited. Tailoring was another skill and trainings and a tailoring unit was also set up and this too ran well but with limited employment opportunities again. Only the initiatives where there were enterprising women with leadership were sustained. But this did not give scope to a large
number of women to get employment and women were in need of a daily living wage which these kinds of engagements did not guarantee and which also required some level of investment.

4.1.4 A new initiative for alternate employment

In mid-1985, Nalini discussed the proposal regarding taking up work in the service sector. Women could be trained and services organized.⁹ At that time, Nalini was employed at the Shree Chitra Tirunal Institute of Medical Sciences and Technology as a social worker and saw the need for paramedical assistance for patients who were discharged from hospital and who could not be managed by relatives for various reasons. She felt that women could be trained to offer such assistance to patients and suggested this possibility to the women members. The first reaction of the women was to refuse – they had not ever worked for wages, they had always been self-employed, some of them had never left their villages although the fish vendors had but there were lots of women in coastal communities who generally did not, what would their husbands think? They were insecure about working with sick people and in other people’s homes – how would they be treated? These were women who came from socially marginalized communities. The fishing community women suffered from a stigma by mainstream communities who referred to them pejoratively as they were supposed to smell of fish. The reed workers were insecure as they were from a schedule caste. But in discussion, all these objections were tackled and this itself was a process of building up the self-confidence of the women. It was suggested that 20 women come forward for a three week training and the rest would follow.

Among the SEWA team too there was apprehension as to how such a service would work. People in Trivandrum, which was not a business centre, were not used to paying for professional help. How much could be demanded? Domestic workers were generally treated with disdain. After long discussions it was decided that SEWA would strive to get just wages for the workers and that work would be done professionally and that those seeking a worker would be told about the conditions of work so that the workers would be treated with respect. Arriving at a wage in those days was difficult as this service was not yet classified/scheduled and no minimum wages were fixed.

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⁹ Report of the 13th committee meeting of SEWA
The first nursing assistants training started in early 1986. 25 women came in for training and they were divided into two groups. While one group got the theoretical inputs, the other got the practical training from nurses from the Mitraniketan Hospital from Vagamon. They were taught about the importance of service and the caring for the sick, bed making, patient diets, sponge bath, massage, exercise, administering the bedpan, patient care and approach, individual hygiene. Besides the actual patient care inputs, there were other subjects like the role and space for women in society and in development, how women could organize and the role of SEWA as a women’s and workers organization, women’s issues and creating local vanitha vedis or women’s forums. Several skilled friends gave of their time to impart this training.

The team was aware that there was a responsibility in workers entering a private home. It was therefore important that the women would be known by the team and for this the women’s forums at the local level would be a way of women not only being organized locally but would also be a means of relating to women and providing the contact point so that women who came in for work would have a local self-monitoring mechanism. These local organizational processes were also discussed.

Once the training was completed, SEWA put small notices in a few hospitals giving the telephone number. Some friends immediately engaged the trained women. The demands began to grow very gradually. The women who were employed, brought credit to the organization. Women had to use a uniform, timings were strict both for the clients and the women workers, details about the work the women could and would do and the food they had to receive were informed to the clients. If the worker was required to keep a patient company in hospital, then she had to receive an extra allowance for her food. The clients had to sign a work card every day with the timings and payment had to be made in the office. The worker members could come and collect their money from the office whenever they desired. Those workers who needed daily payments would come to the office on a daily basis to collect their wages but this gradually changed and by 1991 payments were streamlined to twice a week. Eventually, because of the women’s demand, payments stabilized to three days a week with some coming even only on a monthly basis.
4.1.5 The problematic issue of fixing wages

Women domestic workers were not being paid more than Rs.300 a month at that time. They did get some payment in kind but the cash payments were low. The members of SEWA decided that unless they were able to get Rs.600 a month it was not worthwhile. The team was talking of a higher than usual wage, the need for decent work with regulated hours, clear defining of duties, responsibilities of the workers – basically that these workers who would work in the domestic sphere were not ‘servants’ and there was a need to treat them with dignity as they in return were offering a specialized service.

Hence the following wage was decided on: For those working 8 hours a day it would be Rs.25 for a day and Rs.30 for the night. For those working on a monthly basis living in they would get Rs. 400 a month, with the Sunday off. For those going out of Trivandrum Rs.600 and Rs. 400 for 15 days and Rs. 300 for 10 days. During the day the worker would have to get tea twice a day and one meal.

The registration fees for an employer for full time worker was Rs. 25 and half time Rs. 15 (June 1989). All payments were made in and through the office. The registration fee was paid by the clients which met the expenses of the office and the salary for the worker was also paid in advance. The worker got a monthly work card from the office for which she also made a tiny contribution. This was her guarantee for the payment she would receive as and when she required for the number of days worked.

Over the years the wages have increased. In 2012, a worker is paid Rs.200 a day, with a Rs.3 contribution a day from the employer towards her welfare fund. She also gets four paid offs as Rs.100 a day. The service fee for the employer in the organization is Rs. 500 at the start and Rs. 100 for every consecutive month.

4.1.6 Savings and welfare fund

Right from the start the workers were encouraged to put by some money as a saving and a contribution towards their welfare. The organization put an equal amount towards welfare. The
Welfare fund was used in times of death and for health care for those who were regular participants. They could also withdraw it if and when they left the organization.

There was also a contributory Health fund: They paid Rs. 2 a month and if they had a need, they would get 10 times the amount that was deposited. If in 10 years they had no need for the money, they would get back the money they contributed.

Over the years this grew into a contributory welfare fund with each party depositing Rs. 3 a day. The workers have also the advantage of drawing loans on their share of the welfare fund when they want.

4.1.7 Consolidation of the membership and the work

Once the women started getting a regular wage, things also improved for them in the family. Not all their husbands and children were happy about the fact that the mother/wife was going out to work. Some even objected and so there were regular meetings with the husbands to clarify doubts. But gradually things began to change when women brought home their wages, also got more confident with the input sessions that they received and began to receive more cooperation from their husbands. Although women would say “I am always grateful to SEWA that has given me a way to be self-reliant, to keep my family going, to get respect and to have self-respect myself”, it was not true that women developed better status in the home with the economic independence. Men needed to continue to assert their dominance and this would happen in different ways. Some of them would keep demanding the money from the wives, others continued to drink and batter their wives, some borrowed and made the wives repay their debts. In the majority of the cases, the responsibility of educating the children and keeping the home fires burning was the sole responsibility of the women. While the women spoke out openly about this, not many of them were willing to take any steps against their men. The need to conform and take all the abuse continued to be the major thrust. There were a tiny number of women who also took advantage of the new found freedoms by creating extra marital relationships but this was more noticeable when the era of the cell phone came of its own. These issues were discussed at the vanitavedi meetings and it was at these I that norms of the organization were discussed and developed.
In 1987\textsuperscript{10} it was decided that a nursing assistant would not stay with a client for more than three months at a time. This decision was made to safeguard that no worker would take advantage of a client. Although this decision was put into practice quite rigorously in the beginning, it had to be waived as many clients began to object. When a patient got used to one nursing assistant, they were unwilling to change and this was understandable. But if that was so, the organization did not entertain complaints from the client in the future. This had its negative impact on the organization. Once the client got close to the worker, then the client tried to wean the worker away from the organization and very often succeeded as for the worker it was more important to have a good benefactor helping them with their children’s education or with housing loans etc. But several clients and even women workers had also to pay for this as the workers would make excessive demands that the clients could not finally give into, or when women were dropped like a hot potato by the client. Nevertheless, there were a good number of women who remained faithful to the organization, understanding their role in it and several of them brought new clients and workers to the organization.

All the members were married women. No one could come directly for work. They had to become a member of a local \textit{vanitha vedi} and only then come for a training. In this way the women knew each other in their areas and some bonds between them were built. The \textit{vanithavedis} met once a month and skills to manage local meetings were also developed in this manner. The \textit{vanitavedis} were also the platforms where local issues were discussed, aspects of the work and organization were also discussed. Major decisions of the managing committee were also communicated and feedback sought. It was the \textit{vanithavedis} that also elected their representatives to the managing committee of the organization.

In early 1988\textsuperscript{11}, it was decided that women would also go to work on a full time basis as they were spending too much on transport to and from work. Their families had begun to accept this and they could have more money to take home. They would have a weekly off as at that time, they did get a Sunday off, but they were not paid for it.

\section*{4.2 SEWA’s skill training}

\textsuperscript{10} Meeting of 10.10 1987

\textsuperscript{11} Meeting held on 28.2.88
The services SEWA offered were built around the normal caring skills that women had. The training helped them to get a better understanding of such work and to do it more professionally. Hence caring for the sick, children and cooking were easy for women to understand. But SEWA resisted sending women as domestic ‘servants’, for cooking and cleaning, although there was a big demand. As an organization it was felt that it would not be possible to regulate such work as this was a work that was exploited and not valued. So SEWA gave women a training in cooking in order to run canteens as a group. Initially the trained women ran canteens either of their own or of the organization. This was to teach them skills to manage the unit. But gradually, SEWA was invited to run the canteens in institutions and this was a new beginning and another first in the State.

In early 1990, a service of post natal care was started. Initially it was women who did this traditionally who offered to go for the 40 days post-delivery. But then there was also a training to systematize what would be done by the assistant. It was clear that the assistant would stay for 40 days, initially full time. She would look after mother and child, giving them the herbal massage and bath, washing their clothes, cleaning their rooms and giving mother sufficient time to rest. Some of the assistants also made special diets for the mother. Eventually, this service became only a day service as the organization realized that the assistant got no rest even at night and many of the members felt that this was not sustainable. Nevertheless, as this service required more work, the higher wage was fixed initially for a period of 40 days. For those who agreed to go out of Trivandrum, they got a higher wage.

Subsequently in 2000 a group of 20 women were also trained by Dr. Vijayan, an ayurvedic doctor, in the traditional massage of the mother and child and diet components. These women have been regularly on call for post natal care. But the client needs have also changed in time. While some still insist on the traditional care, others just want help with the child care. Some of the clients also just want assistance for a few days while others keep on the worker for a few years until the child is relatively independent.

Over the years there were changes in the way the training was conducted. This also had to do with the change in the ‘service provider’ environment, the demands, together with the needs of the women themselves. Initially all the women made a small contribution towards training fees. After the first couple of batches of training when each batch comprised of 25 women, the
numbers increased when there were also 45-50 women in a batch. In those days the training sessions were for three weeks and they were mainly for nursing assistance. But later when the trainings were in cooking and cleaning, the number of days were reduced and fell to 10 when the groups were also smaller and the contributions as fees was also lowered. Today, the number of training days has reduced to 6 days with groups of 5-7 women with follow up sessions and close supervision when placed.

4.2.1 Accessing the services

Clients have to register in the organization when they demand a service. Depending on the availability of workers, they could have a waiting time. When they actually get the worker, they pay the registration fee and a month’s advance payment of salary for the worker. The registration fee is the service charge for the organization. This is valid for three months after which the client pays an additional charge every month. The amount collected for the worker, which also includes the welfare contribution, is given in to the worker.

4.2.2 Supervision of the services

Right from the start, the women were supervised in their work. This was not done on a house to house or woman to woman basis. Certain women who were not able to respond to the needs, who may have had personal problems or with poorer skills were followed up. When there were clients who required special help because they had specific diseases, someone from the office went to help the woman understand how to assist the specific patient. House visits were also made when there were complaints from the clients or from the women regarding the work demands or difficulty in communication between the two.

There are several clients who feel that since women are paid, they need to do all kinds of work for anybody in the house. Often clients come for assistance when there are functions in the house and expect the worker to cook, clean and wash clothes of 7-8 people on a daily basis. Sometimes the houses are 3-4000 sq feet and the workers are supposed to cook and clean and mop the entire house each day squatting on their haunches and without any rest. There are also problems regarding providing women with food and rest. On the part of the women workers too there are problems regarding getting to work on time, wanting to leave early, staying off from work without informing the client, extending the weekly off and stealing. Many of the clients bring
these problems to the attention of the office, but several of them do not complain in sympathy of the worker or because they feel dependent on the worker. Several workers also take advantage of this.

In the mid 1990s, there were increasing demands being made by clients especially regarding the day off of the workers. They were beginning to request a substitute on the day off or were willing to pay extra wages so that the worker did not take an off. Many of the women wanted the extra money but this gradually actually affected the quality of service and made the workers over confident and less inclined to be open to further learning.

In 1991, when workers developed arrogance because of over confidence the clients confidentially complained. Subsequently SEWA set up a system of making clients fill in an evaluation from so that the organization could interact with the workers and pursue the service mentality without compromising on their rights. Unfortunately very few of the clients were willing to actually make any negative remarks about the worker as they felt that they would loose the confidence of the worker or that this would discredit the worker in the organization. This in the long run has hampered the efficient supervision of the workers who realize that they are often indispensable to the clients. This in turn has hampered the actual professionalization of the service as both the clients and the workers in a large number of cases relate on a very subjective basis.

4.3 As SEWA grew

By the mid-1990s, the membership in SEWA swelled and in the late 1990s there were over 1500 members in Trivandrum and new SEWAs built up in Ernakulam and later in Trissur as mentioned earlier. (This document does not reflect those experiences as they were intentionally built up autonomously with inputs from Trivandrum).

Besides the monthly meetings of the vanita vedis, all through 2000, there were a series of seminars for the members through which the women’s leadership was also built up. From these weekend seminars, more able women were selected and they received special inputs depending
on their ability to read and understand other social issues. There were three groups of women, graded according to their comprehension abilities. They received inputs on various subjects commencing with the issues of politics and decentralization, the communalization of public life and politics, health and environmental issues, women’s specific issues and the various bills related to women, the larger discussion on the unorganized sector and the development of the Bills to protect their interests.

These inputs stimulated women to participate in local processes of the Kerala Stree Vedi, (the women’s platform) and other demonstrations for environmental conservation etc. As the members belonged to the larger SEWA family, there were several occasions when groups of women participated in national meetings. This was a big eye opener for them on the one hand to understand that Kerala was far advanced in education and infrastructure development than several other northern states but on the other hand that women in Kerala lacked the freedom of movement that women in other states enjoyed. The fact that they could be out on the streets alone and after dark was a liberating experience for the members.

When communal struggles began to erupt in north Kerala, they were also discussed. The members of SEWA came largely from Hindu and Christian backgrounds with only a handful of Muslim members. Over the years it was also becoming apparent that women could be easily swayed by larger social pressures, with the increasing of religious ritualism and it was important that women would be able to decipher the difference and respect various religious identities without being swayed and used by religious bigots. There were open discussion on these subjects and a group of members also developed a street play on peace and religious harmony which they enacted at street corners of the district on the second Saturday of every month. This process went on for around 2 years.

In this way, the members grew to have a wider social and political consciousness while they also were able to enhance their family incomes and quality of life. It was very rewarding to hear children of members say at holiday camps “my mother has really benefited from being a member of SEWA. She is very strong and open unlike my father who is still very conservative.’ Most of the children have been able to appreciate the struggle their mothers have put up to make their lives more comfortable when several of their fathers have fallen into the trap of alcohol and act irresponsibly.
SEWA did make the effort to get the husbands of the women together on certain occasions. Large groups of them wanted their husbands to also be exposed to discussions on several subjects. The response was extremely poor as men refused to participate.

In the attempt to also treat such domestic services as regular work, the managing committee in 2003 decided to make the clients contribute towards a small welfare fund of the workers. There was no serious objection to this and so while the clients contributed Rs. 3 a day towards the workers welfare fund, the worker also set aside Rs. 3 towards her welfare fund contribution. By the following year, when the workers realized they have a substantial saving in the form of a welfare fund that was saved within the organization, they requested that they be allowed to borrow from this amount. Hence SEWA commenced a system of borrowings on their welfare fund which the members make full use of. Unfortunately several of the members borrow this money for family needs and many of them find it difficult to pay it back. This means that when they are unable to work on their own, they will not have anything to fall back on.

As time went on, those women who did a full time job, were eager to do only day work. This was understandable as they needed to be with their husbands and also their growing children. As violence on women began to increase in Kerala, women were even reluctant to leave their grown up daughters alone with their husbands at home. Their own emancipation did not pay dividends. But this also reduced the full time workers although the demand kept growing. More frequent bus services in the district also facilitated women’s movements although the amount they spent on daily bus fares substantially reduced the take home income.

As women began to get older, they were also unable to do all the work that was required of them. Many of them did not want to stop working as they loose their source of income and have nothing to fall back on. On the other hand, for those women who have been able to educate their children and when the children marry and have regular sources of income, they stop their mothers from going to work. Some of them do this as a gesture of generosity and respect for their mothers, while others need their mothers to help them at home with their own children. Most women are willing to surrender their economic independence and freedom of mobility to come to the rescue of their children. But several of them return to work when they are no longer required at home. The plight of such unorganized women workers is pitiable.
4.3.1 Challenges in the organization and service delivery

Maintaining the quality of service and the integrity of the women at work has not always been easy. Most often clients understanding these problems but sometimes they do not. Re-educating the members is not easy. When women are willing to accept their mistakes, there is a possibility to help them out grow them. But there are occasions when SEWA has had to stop women from working or that women themselves stop to come to work and then go to work through the other agencies.

There have been only two cases of sexual abuse that the members reported. Both cases were taken up by the organization when both clients admitted to their faults and apologized. One even asked for advice regarding counseling to overcome his mal behavior.

In the early 1990s itself, as this service became popular and in demand, several other such service providers surfaced. It was seen as a lucrative business. In fact, a group of SEWA’s own staff members who left the organization for various reasons, started similar services, even taking away large groups of women who found the SEWA norms too stringent. SEWA did not send women for hourly work and to several houses on the same day. But as this was a demand of working women in domestic chores, such ‘labour contractors’ thrived. Hence this started the decline not only in the quality of work generally but also in the way such women workers began to be exploited. There was no specific training given, no follow up, no accountability of and to the workers. Women who went to work through other organizations also said they were from SEWA as this seemed to bring them credibility but brought discredit to SEWA. There was also a lot of confusion among the workers themselves and on the whole the mushrooming of organizations meant a fall in standards on the whole.

It was quite evident that the contractors’ grew in wealth as the land and buildings they were able to purchase for themselves was proof of this. On the contrary, all those who were employed in SEWA were on a regular salary, the founder members who continued to give time to building up the organization did so on a voluntary basis, and any excess money earned in the organization went back to the members in forms of their own trainings, exposures, welfare programmes and building up assets for the organization.
Cooperation between the workers also waned. In fact when a client engages two workers simultaneously from SEWA there can be difficulties. If the women are not cooperative and in competition with the other they attempt to shirk work and keep the bulk of it for the other. Substituting the other in time has also been very difficult when the day worker has to be relieved by the night worker. Hence some clients prefer to take two workers from different organizations.

The other challenge has been to find a Sunday substitute for workers who work full time. A number of clients do not want to give their worker a day off especially in cases of patient care. They do not mind paying for the day off, but they insist on having a worker seven days a week. This has been another ordeal for SEWA as it is not always possible to get a substitute only for the Sunday and then clients and the worker get very agitated.

4.4 Structure of SEWA

SEWA in Kerala was initially registered as a membership based Society under the Charitable Societies Act. All the women were members who locally belonged to the vanita Vedis – or women’s forum at the local level. This was the basic unit of the organization. Women met once a month in the vanita vedi where they discuss and take up local issues of the members. All members know each other in the vanita vedi and SEWA tries to build up a women worker’s solidarity at this level.

Until 2010 the vanita vedi elected its representative to the SEWA Managing Committee and this was the executive body of the orgnaistion from which its office bearers were also elected. The two founding members of the organization, Aleyamma Vijayan and Nalini Nayak were permanent members of the Managing Committee.

The decision making body of the organization was the general body which met once a year. This included all the members of SEWA.

All the members of SEWA also were members of the SEWA Union. But until 2009, they paid their membership to the SEWA national union in Gujarat as there was no registration of the union in Kerala. But in 2009, when SEWA got its registration in Kerala, the members became members of SEWA Union – Kerala which then became an institutional member of the National SEWA Union.
Between 2010 and 2011 there was a major change in the setup of the organization. While SEWA began to grow and develop several activities, all the members who went to work through the organization were not able to comprehend the developments within the organization. SEWA’s work as a trade union, its work with the reed workers that had now created a Federation of their own, the Worker’s Resource Centre that evolved, the computer training unit and the rural work that had all become activities in their own right. Hence it was felt that the service activities of the organization could also develop as an entity of its own and in discussion with the committee it was decided to register the service component as a separate structure. This gave birth to the Swasherya Mahila Sewa Sangam (SMSS) – the Hindi equivalent for the self-employed women’s organization. But for the most part, the structure remained the same within the organization.

Subsequently, the SMSS became an institutional member of SEWA whose byelaws were also amended, and then it was the committee members of the SMSS that became the general body members of SEWA.

4.5 Struggles with the Government provisions

Being a service provider SEWA at different points of its history had to confront the public authorities. The first issue was that of a Provident Fund for its members in 1999. With the changes in the Contract Labour Act and the fact that large employers were privatizing several of its services, SEWA was also seen as a labour contractor when it agreed to run institutional canteens. SEWA was required to produce its PF returns when it entered an agreement with an institution. But at that time, the Provident Fund department was also not geared to understanding the needs of the unorganized sector, namely that women did not regularly work under one employer and did not work every day. Women were also not willing to let go of 12% of their meager daily wages and await a benefit after retirement. Although SEWA did try to get an exemption on the grounds that it was a membership organization with no employer-employee relationship, it was not possible to obtain this. Understanding that the PF does benefit the women at large, SEWA set up its own welfare fund, not the 12% as legally demanded but 3% for the start. This the clients and the women contributed to but this fund was controlled by SEWA. The members were also permitted to borrow money for their other needs from this fund. But by 2011,
some of the institutions were willing to include the SEWA workers on their PF lists thereby giving the benefits to the workers. Happily in 2010, Kerala also established the Shops and Establishments Welfare Fund Board which provided for welfare of the workers and it was possible for the workers in any small establishment to register in this Board.

When the central government announced the ‘man power recruitment agencies’ as a taxable commercial activity, SEWA was asked to register as a Service Provider. When SEWA refused as it was not a labour recruiting organization but a membership organization trying to find work for its members, that it was not a profit making body and that it collected the wages of the workers as wages and its service charges separately, on scrutiny of its accounts the tax officials found that there was one case were two women went to clean the BSNL office on an agreement of the organization when the payment of wages and service charge was made through the same cheque. They used this as a case to argue that SEWA was a labour supplying agency thereby demanding that SEWA pay tax on all the money that it has collected both as wages and service charges. While SEWA was willing to pay the tax on the service charges it receives, it feels that this present demand is unjustified and SEWA is presently in court on this issue as it feels it has a strong case to argue against.
SECTION 5

5.1 Assessing the impact of professional domestic services

What follows is an attempt to understand in greater detail the impact of a concerted effort in the professionalizing of domestic work. In order to do this a selected group of trained and untrained workers were interviewed with the help of a guideline. Their narrations are used to explain different aspects of professionalism and also to understand the experience of a domestic worker. Those who hire domestic workers (clients) have also been visited and interviewed in their homes to get their opinions about the services rendered and to understand their experiences with the workers.

The trained workers were selected from SEWA. The experiences of these workers ranged from 10 to 40 years. Three of them had worked for more than 40 years. The untrained workers were selected from the wider membership of the SEWA union. Since 2010, several women workers have been joining the union and a substantial number of them are domestic workers. They are workers who go to work directly or through agencies other than SEWA but have not received any specific training for the work. Of these again the selections were from the rural area, the urban area and from the coastal area. They also hailed from a cross section of castes but unlike the trained workers, a larger percentage of them were illiterate (24%). Forty percent of them were also single headed households similar to those who had been trained. This makes us deduce that almost 40% of the poor households in the district from which women go for domestic work could be single female headed households.

We have combined the narratives of the experiences of the women who are both trained and untrained and also quantitatively interpreted some of the common data.

5.1.1 The Background of the workers

Most of the workers had taken to domestic work either because of economic problems in the family, alcohol addicted partners, husbands’ death or separation from the husband. They expressed the difficulty to live with one person’s income. Even those who didn’t have any support in the family, like a mother or somebody to care for the children, had to work in order to
earn a steady income to sustain the family. This was the case with both the trained and the untrained workers.

Some of the women had been working as domestic workers from childhood. A few had worked in tailoring, sales and in canteens before entering this sector.

Usha, an untrained worker was earlier involved in cattle rearing. She said “My husband worked and supported us. He died 12 years ago. When his income stopped I could not manage the family with just the income from the cow. Hence I went in for domestic work.”

Shobha an untrained worker said, “I began to do domestic work because of poverty. First I worked in a canteen and there I was over worked, I got low wages and faced other exploitation too. So I decided to leave that and get into domestic work”.

Girija, another untrained worker reported, “I started work after having two children. Even though my husband worked he is physically not fit and does not earn much and so I was forced to work. I went to work in a house which I knew before. I have been working since the last ten years”.

Lexy, also an untrained worker who was from the fishing community had an interesting story. She said, “I learnt tailoring after I stopped my studies. It gave me a small income. After my marriage I continued tailoring but at one juncture there was a loan scheme started by the Matsya Fed for buying sewing machines. So there was suddenly a sewing machine in almost every home and I got less work. My husband was a fisherman and he too faced difficulties as fish catches reduced and there was no regular income. So I decided to go for domestic work”.

Another untrained worker, Girija said she came from a very backward family. “We were six children and I couldn’t go to school because of my family situation. I started going for domestic work when I was 10 years old and I stayed in one house for many years. Since my father was a drunkard all my four sisters went to work in different houses. I used to get Rs.30 a month in the beginning. After I matured I stopped going for full time work. After marriage I stopped for two years to look after the children but since my husband was a drunkard I was forced to go to work again to look after the family as he does nothing for us”.

So all the women had been obliged by circumstances to go to work and domestic work was a means of an indispensable income for them.
Below is a consolidated breakup of the years of service.

**Table 1: Number of years in domestic work**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of years</th>
<th>Trained respondents</th>
<th>Untrained respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.1.2 **Existence of SEWA – a means to a decent livelihood**

For the trained workers, their stories reveal that it was the possibility of getting a training and developing some skills through the process of becoming members of SEWA, that they got into domestic work when they needed to work. They had joined the vanithavedis of the organization to get a job. Then they underwent a training. They thereby acquired different kinds of skills like looking after the sick, the children, postnatal services, cooking, cleaning etc. The duration of the trainings varied from 10 to 30 days. Subsequently they went to work.

Leela said, “Traditionally we were doing pottery. When our pots lost the market we stopped the work. I then went for quarry work. But my children insisted that I stop doing it as such work was too difficult and poorly paid. I did not know how to find other work. Then somebody whom I knew introduced me to SEWA”.

Sudharma reported, “My husband left me 15 years ago and I had no means of livelihood. I had not worked before and did not know what to do. Then I heard about SEWA”. Cyble recounted, “My husband is a big drunkard. He is very violent with me and life was difficult as I could not
feed the children. Since I had not much education, I had no other alternative than going to domestic work. But I needed to support my family and needed a good wage. That is how I came to SEWA”.

All of them expressed that they gradually began to feel that they too had a ‘job’ and earned a wage. The trainings had given them not only expertise in their actual skills but it had helped them grow personally, understanding society, their work, the organization, personal cleanliness and better attitudes as one who worked as a cook expressed, “I got to know more about cooking, the minute details of making tasty food and personally I have changed a lot as a person after the training”. While the majority of the trained workers did patient care, a few of the untrained workers also did more specific kinds of services – some doing child and patient care. But the majority of the untrained workers did cooking and cleaning work.

The table below indicates the kinds of services the workers are involved in.

**Table2: Kinds of services performed by the workers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kinds of service rendered</th>
<th>Trained respondents</th>
<th>Untrained respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequenc y</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient care</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>56.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since the trained respondents were from SEWA, it is understandable that the majority of them were in patient care. When SEWA entered domestic services, it started with patient care as it was assumed that clients would not be willing to accept paying decent wages for the regular cooking and cleaning that domestic workers normally did and neither would workers be treated as workers and with respect. It was only about 10 years later, when some standards were set and clients began to demand, that SEWA also started training workers for domestic services in cooking and cleaning and SEWA could determine the terms and conditions of the work delivered and demanded.

5.1.3 Experiences of becoming a worker

Whereas householders need domestic workers, they rarely want to consider them as workers. Women, who go for domestic work, as this is something they also do in their homes, also do not consider themselves workers. They build up very dependent relationships with the householder that on the one hand may bring them some favours but on the other hand also diminishes the value of their service and bargaining capacity. SEWA considers it important to develop a worker identity in the women workers and attitudes and belonging to a worker’s union have been integrated in the training.

Leela P said, “I knew only my own household work. But I got a skill in looking after the sick through the SEWA trainings. I learnt new things and practice what I know in a more organized way”.

Leela said, “I got to know about women’s issues and also labour rights through the trainings we had”.

Sudharma said, “I learned cleaning in a systematic way. I learned how to relate to others properly and about my personal hygiene. My fear disappeared and I became confident. My family was very worried about me going out to work and in someone else’s house, but I could gradually convince them that what I was doing was a good job”.

5.1.4 Confidence inspired by the organizational identity and training

Today domestic work has gained respectability in Trivandrum but this was not so when several of these women started working. Several of them needed to work in order to earn money but
there was resistance from families as Pushpam said, “When I started going for domestic work there was so much resistance from my family. Then my family understood when they also saw me going to meetings and to the SEWA office. Later I got acceptance and my children agreed that their mother is working. I feel accepted and respected”.

Baby explained, “because of the organization and the training, I got the courage to go for this work. I gradually also understood that I am a worker. I could deal with all kinds of people. My financial situation has improved and my children respect me. I have gained self-confidence”.

Sujatha said, “I got confidence in my work place and I know how to behave in other houses. I have been able to change my husband’s attitude towards me, my children and the home. Our own home has become more professional and the children more disciplined. We have all grown”.

Leela experienced difficulty in managing her home and going to work. She said, “When my children were small, I found it very difficult to go to work. Now they have grown up and I don’t have any problems. I try to keep separate my work and family issues. I still have financial problems. My husband and children quite understand that my work makes demands on me and most of the time they cooperate. But sometimes it is still difficult”.

Sarala said, “I learnt about my rights as a worker through SEWA. Because of this I feel more confident at my work place. I can also point out when I am not treated properly. The classes on social awareness, women’s issues and labour rights have opened my eyes. I do not feel I am a nobody. I have built up a respectable space for myself in my family now”.

Nakshatram expressed, “I got confidence to take decisions in my life. My fear went away and I got the courage to travel alone. Since I had no husband the neighbours treated me as a bad woman. It is only because of the support of the organization that I have managed my life and brought up my daughter”.

Usha had a different story. She said, “I feel I have become a different person. When I go to work I forget my home and all the other problems”.
All the trained workers said that it is the support of the organization and the training it offers that has given them strength. They feel they are able to communicate better with the employers and to give and get respect.

They also felt that they had grown as persons themselves.

Ammini said, “I was a very silent and non communicative person. But after the training and going to work I was able to develop an open relationship with my children. This has changed the atmosphere in my family. I started also to share my problems with others.”

They also feel that they get more respect and recognition in the workplace as Thankam said, “Wearing a uniform gives us a feeling of dignity and we also get special attention because of it whether we work in a hospital or in a home”. Shanta added, “We have free access to any hospital any time in our uniform and badge”.

Getting a training in nursing assistance has helped them develop a skill. According to Girija, “I learnt to do things in an orderly fashion. There are different aspects of looking after the sick like bed making, giving a bath, helping them to sit comfortably and to walk. There is a way to do all this so that the patient is comfortable – all this I learnt through the training”.

Sujatha said, “I was rearing cattle before coming to this work. My mother was a member of SEWA. When I joined, I got training in cleaning. From the training I learnt to operate different electronic gadgets that I had not seen before and to use cleaning equipment that I was not used to. I understood all these techniques through the training”.

Pushpam said, “I was doing tailoring and to make more money I thought of going for domestic work. I started going to nearby houses. Then I came to SEWA and got training in nursing the sick. It was a different experience and I got to know about all the steps of caring for a sick person and also how to behave with the clients”.

Laila narrated, “My mother and relatives were doing the same kind of work. I knew some things about the work through them. But I joined SEWA and got a training for one month. I learnt several things about the work and also how to relate to others and behave while in the home of the patient”.

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It is evident from the narrations of the women themselves that their belonging to an organization and the training have helped them develop confidence and a sense of dignity. By developing a skill they have brought respectability to the work. The feel the training has equipped them to communicate better from the point of view of their rights to regulated work. They have tried their maximum to separate their work place issues and family issues. They have understood that as workers they keep aside their personal problems while entering another home to work.

On the contrary in most of the narrations of the untrained women, domestic work is a means of livelihood, taken very casually and informally. It is understandable that they have gone to work with the aim of making some money and do not envisage anything more.

Molly said, “I used to do domestic work from childhood. My mother was a domestic worker and I went with her to the house she is working and later I started working there. It’s like my own house and whatever they give me I take. This is the only job I can do so nothing will change for me.”

Maria said, “I started going to domestic work after my husband’s death. We have some debts. I am staying with my children and I don’t want to get ill- treated. I work and pay the debt, that is all”.

Jayakumari said, “I started working when my husband lost his job. I started helping in a house and then went to other houses also. I do not tell anyone that I am going to domestic work. I want to stop it when my children get married. So I don’t think I need to improve my skill”.

Suma said, “I am going to a house regularly and to another house twice in a week. I get Rs.1500 from one house and Rs.500 from the other one. I did not ask for the payment, I was just told that this is what they will pay me. So I accepted. I get other help from the houses. But I do not like to be called “veettu velakkari”. I don’t want to continue in this work for many years”.

It is evident that the attitude to work and understanding about their rights is quite different for the trained and untrained workers.
5.1.5 Changes that training brought to the work of former domestic workers

It is interesting to compare their experiences before and after the training. Thanki had gone for domestic work from her childhood, from 9 years until 20 when she got married. She took a break after the marriage. But 8 years ago her husband fell sick and she was forced to go to work. She compared her experiences before and after. She said “When I had worked as a girl, it was like being in another family and the work was natural. But now I go to different houses and I have become brave and confident. I feel I do my work with some method and by becoming a worker and earning my own income; it has improved my space in the home and in society. I get more respect”.

Baby who was a member of SEWA for the last 19 years explained how the training and atmosphere in the organization changed her. She was doing domestic work since she was 10 years old. Her family was in utter poverty and the father was sick. When she was 14 years she went to a matchbox company and worked there. After her marriage and also giving birth to three children she heard about SEWA and became a member in her local area. She decided to go for a cooking training and then work as a cook. She said, “I learnt all the cooking I know through SEWA. This was really a different experience from all the earlier work I had done. I learnt a lot of other things too. Now I know how to even manage a canteen or a restaurant”.

Nakshatram who was working as a full time nursing assistant for the last 14 years said, “Looking after the sick is not like the duties we do at home. The training enriched my skill for patient care”.

Lalitha was a domestic worker from the age of six. She worked till she was 20 years old. Then after her marriage she came to SEWA to work as a domestic worker. “I got training to care for the sick. I have learnt that systematically and my whole attitude towards domestic work changed because of that. I learnt to relate to others and gained confidence. My family situation has changed a lot as the economic situation improved. My children regularly attend summer camps conducted by SEWA and they have learnt a lot there.”
Laila narrated, “My mother and relatives were doing the same kind of work. I knew some things about the work through them. But I have acquired discipline and order through the one month training at SEWA”.

Radha said, “I worked as a domestic worker from my childhood. But when I came to SEWA I had to undergo a training which I initially resisted. But the trainings taught me so many new things. I learned different methods of cooking and cleaning. I got an order for everything and I follow it up till today where ever I go to work. I get respect and recognition in my work places”.

Leela said, “I was staying in a house where my parents used to work since I was 15 years old. I did all the work there as a domestic worker until my marriage. My husband is a daily labourer and after the children were born I thought of working because it was difficult to manage with one person’s income. Since I had a background of domestic work I decided to go for it. I joined SEWA and the training I got there changed my attitude towards it. I learnt different kinds of cooking and cleaning methods, which I felt is a new skill and I feel I get more respect now”.

Sujatha said, “I was rearing cattle before coming to this work. I could not support the family on just my husband’s income and the cattle. So I went to SEWA nine years ago. My mother is a member of SEWA. I got training in cleaning. From the training I learnt to operate different electronic gadgets that I had not seen before and to use cleaning equipment that I was not used to. I understood all these techniques through the training”.

### 5.1.6 Wages and living conditions

The majority of the trained women get an average daily wage of Rs.150-180. They have fixed hours of work and clear working conditions. The wages of untrained women varies. It depends on the kind of work they do and the number of houses they work in.
Table 3 Earnings of the workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rupees</th>
<th>Trained respondents</th>
<th>Untrained respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 2000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-4000</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4000-6000</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>56.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 6000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The trained workers received between Rs.4000-6000 a month while only a few of the untrained workers received this wage. Nevertheless, some of the untrained workers also received more than Rs.6000 which none of the trained workers of SEWA received. This has a positive and negative side to it. The workers of SEWA are obliged to follow a norm regarding wages which means that some of the poor workers are guaranteed the stated wage while the better workers are not better rewarded for their enhanced services. On the other hand, the untrained workers either loose out because they have no organizational backing to demand the minimum wage and the good workers can also demand a higher wage from a client who is willing to pay for the services. Most of the trained and skilled workers feel unhappy about their wages.

Many of the untrained women work in multiple houses in order to get more wages. They work for 2-3 hours in two or three houses. They get an average of Rs.2000-3000 which according to them is a good wage. They do not feel they can bargain for better wages because they say the clients help them in many other ways. They feel they have a personal relation with the household and not a work relation. The service takers on their part are also very happy to keep the women in this position.
Sindhu, an untrained worker goes to three houses and does cleaning. Since she does only cleaning it is easy to go to three houses but on alternate days. Her own household responsibilities don’t get affected because of her outside work. She earns an average of Rs.6000 altogether.

Nevertheless, many of them also face difficulties because they work in several places which they do not openly challenge but which they complained about.

Ambika for instance, said that she works in three houses. She works for 3-4 hours in each house. She does not get any food and because of the limited time she has to complete a big quantity of work. She has to finish all the cooking and cleaning jobs within that particular time.

Lucy who is 37 years old works in four houses. She starts her work at 7 am and ends at 6.30 in the evening. She said, “I do all the cooking and cleaning in all these houses. I have to support my family because my husband is a drunkard. I manage to get Rs.7000 a month”.

Girija reported, “The house that I work in is very particular about the number of days of work. If I don’t go to work for one or two days because of my children’s sickness or some other problems they cut that day’s salary. Yet they keep all the work for the next day and I have to go and do all the previous day’s work. I have fought with them for more salary and the kind of over work they give me”.

Most of the untrained workers said that their wages were fixed before they start work. The majority of them did not think of bargaining as they say they get different kinds of help from the family. They did not have any knowledge about minimum wages.

Leelamma explained, “The family in which I work has sent my husband to the Gulf. So I am obliged to look after their mother with whatever money they are give me. So I do not complain”.

Suma said, “I get only Rs.1500 from a house which I know is little. But I haven’t asked for more money as they help me in other ways”.

Girija said, “I met with an accident in the work place, I fractured my hand. I can’t go to work. The owner helped a lot in the surgery and other hospital expenses”.

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Most of the women (both trained and untrained) are not happy with the wages they get. Cyble, who is a trained worker, has a husband who drinks and does not care for the home. She feels overburdened and complained, “It is difficult to manage the family with the wages I am getting. I need more money”.

Sarala another trained worker said, “My husband has been drinking and so the responsibility of the family is mine. Initially coming to SEWA really helped me as I got sufficient money. But now with the increasing prices and bus charges life is very difficult and I cannot manage with what I am getting”.

Murukamma an untrained worker said, “We live in a city slum and many of us go to nearby houses to do domestic work. We go to work for 2-3 hours and we get around Rs.800-1000 per month. It is difficult to live with this small amount and we are really exploited by the city people”.

Both the trained and untrained workers are not satisfied with their wages and it is evident that they struggle to keep the family going. As the cost of living increases, workers are in need of more money.

5.1.7 Travel time, travel expenses and punctuality at work

Table 4: Whether work place is near the home of the worker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whether work place is near the home of the worker</th>
<th>Trained respondents</th>
<th>Untrained respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>96.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For over 60% of the untrained workers and as many as 96% of the trained workers, the workplaces are quite a distance from their homes. This has to be kept in mind when the cities are being replanned and organized, when the poor working areas are displaced and moved out of the city. This has a negative double pronged effect – workers have to bare high travel costs to work and the public then have to pay higher to hire workers.

Lalitha, an untrained worker said, “I have to catch 3 buses to go to work and sometimes I walk halfway to reduce my expenses. Otherwise I won’t be able to manage my expenses.”

Sindhu another untrained worker said, “I get Rs.1800 as my salary and I have to spend around Rs.50 for bus charge. What will remain”?

**Table 5: Time to travel to work**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time to travel to work</th>
<th>Trained respondents</th>
<th>Untrained respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequenc y</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 30 minutes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 minutes – 1 hour</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>64.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 1 hour</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6: Mode of travel**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of travel</th>
<th>Trained respondents</th>
<th>Untrained respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequenc y</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedestrian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>96.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The tables above reveal that more of the trained workers have a longer distance to travel and they have to take a bus to work while 40% of the untrained workers just go walking to work. This also reveals the nature of the sector. There are demands for domestic workers everywhere and there are women who seek domestic work everywhere. While the more urbanized locations may have the workers living in the colonies and slums, in less urbanized locations the workers live less congregated. Hence they are able to access work in their neighbourhoods in which case they prefer to go to work directly to households in their surroundings. This is not guaranteed when they go to work through an agency. They have to take the work that comes to them on a priority basis and hence they also have long distances to travel sometimes.

The table below indicates the transport costs per day that each worker has to pay to get to and from work.

**Table 7: Transportation charge**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rupees</th>
<th>Trained respondents</th>
<th>Untrained respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Rs.10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rs.11-20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rs.21-30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Rs. 30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

88% of the workers say that they are punctual, while 12% of them say they are not. Being punctual for all of the workers does not mean that they will be there exactly on time- but around the time they are expected to report with a margin of 15-20 minutes. It must also be noted that several of the workers who travel a great distance have been held up also because of the road blocks to work and for some of them who have to walk quite a distance to the client’s residences in the big residential colonies where the buses do not go.
In SEWA, the working time for nursing assistants, cooking assistants is from 8 am to 5.30 pm and for cleaning it is from 9 am to 4 pm.

Table 8: **Whether workers reach work on time**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whether they reach work on time</th>
<th>Trained respondents</th>
<th>Untrained respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>88.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above data is a quantified form of the conversations with these workers regarding their travel, mode of transport and the expenses for the travel. They have to spend a substantial amount of money for their travel to reach the houses where they work. Most of them do not prefer to work in their nearby areas also as they really fear the stigma they face in the society.

Most of the women prefer to go to work through an agency in the initial stages as they feel they will find a safe work place. But once they have found confidence they leave the agency and pursue work on their own. Even the women members of SEWA claim that the organization is their work place which to a certain extent provides them more dignity and also security.

### 5.1.7 Security and other problems at the work place

There are repeatedly stories in the press about domestic workers being badly treated in the families. With the increase in reported violence in the state, one wonders what the fate of the domestic workers in general actually is in Kerala. Interestingly most of the respondents said that they felt very secure in the work place.

The untrained respondents were reluctant in the beginning to reveal any kind of insecurity they faced in their work place. But when problems were suggested and highlighted, then all of them
said they faced problems and the major problems were over work and lack of food. So in general, the untrained workers who go directly for work do not have a concept of what they can and should do at work and it is obvious that clients can demand all kinds of services from them.

Girija and untrained workers said, “In one house I used to get all old food and I was often forced to do over work. So I ran away”.

Lalitha another untrained workers said, “They want us to do all the work. We prepare food for them, but they are reluctant to give us what we make. They treat us as if we are not human. I feel very sad about this”.

Sexual harassment was mentioned by both groups. This kind of harassment varies from comments, to men putting their hands on the workers bodies, and in some extreme cases even asking them for sex. Nevertheless all the workers take precautions not to be left alone with the men folk in the house. The trained nursing assistants also have problems to care for male patients. Some of them had problems from the male patients asking for extra care and the constant presence of the worker by their side. None of the untrained workers wanted to share the problems they faced with anyone. They said that if such things persisted they just left that house. They did not want to make it public and create problems for themselves.

5.1.8 Opinion amongst the untrained workers regarding developing skills

In order to understand whether women who are engaged in domestic work feel they need a training to improve their skills or earn more wages, the untrained workers were asked about it.

Ambika felt, “I am managing OK for the moment. I don’t know how long I will be able to work. So what’s the need of training at this age?”

Shobha said, ”I don’t know for how many more years I will do this work, so I don’t see the need of any further skill training”.

Lekshmi commented, “Since I am doing something which I know what is the need for training”?
Lucy added, “We do the same kind of work that we do at home, so there is no need for any further training”.

Rejitha said, “I work in 2-3 houses. In one of the houses I do only cooking. When guests come they demand new dishes to be cooked. Then I feel I have to learn more about cooking but I feel lazy to go for trainings”.

Beena also said, “The house owner always asks whether I know this or that and then tells me to learn more. One of them taught me to use the gas, and some cleaning material. I know there are other machines too but I don’t think I will go for more training”.

Leelamma on the other hand said, “I am looking after an old mother. When the doctor comes he advises me to do certain things which I am not able to do. He has told me about SEWA. I like to have the chance to improve my skills”.

Valsala also said, “I feel ashamed when the client asks me whether I know this and that. Then I feel I really need some training to improve the skill. But then I have to take some days off from work and I will not get paid”.

Sindhu felt the same, “by going to work in more houses and getting aware of various demands, I realize I need to get more training in the work. I enjoy my work and would like to improve it”.

The trained workers are confident of their work and have gained a sense of identity in doing it. The untrained workers have mixed feelings. Only a few feel the need of more skill training while the others seem so worn out that they are awaiting the day they will not have to work any more. Aspirations towards becoming a skilled domestic worker, getting a better wage with better working conditions are not their concerns. It is also evident that the organizational support, awareness and also the process of recognizing their rights have made the trained workers gain more self respect.

5.1.9 Combining Family and work

Most of the trained women have acquired a confidence and are able to implement well what they have learnt in the training thereby creating their own independence at work. While many of them
continue to have pressures in the family they seem to understand the need to keep their home and work life separate. Most of the workers mentioned their very hard family situations and the struggle they face to work and look after the family. They said they always try their best not to mix their family issues with work but sometimes that is very difficult. Many experienced violence from their husbands. It is this constant pressure and sense of responsibility that forces them to continue to work even as they get older.

Sarala said, “It is over 33 years since I face this drudgery at home. I have learnt to cope with it. Going to work helps me to take some distance from my own problems. I try to forget them there and to do my work sincerely. When I am distressed, I can talk about it in SEWA and I get much support there. One of the staff even calls my husband and counsels him. All this is a great help”.

Valsala an untrained worker said, “I get beaten up by my drunken husband regularly but I still have to go to work. I have to take care of my children and so I leave my family problems at home. I do not talk about them to anybody and I just do my work”.

Ambika an untrained worker said, “My husband has left us and I have to take care of the children and the family responsibilities alone. This is a heavy burden. Sometimes the work outside is also very heavy and I complain but I have to keep on doing it”.

Lekshmi who is younger added, “When my children are sick I do not know whether to go to work or stay at home. It is a struggle for me. Sometimes I know I cannot take leave because I also know there are special days in the client’s house. Those days it is terrible and I am not at peace when I go to work”.

Shoba has a different story. She said, “During the early period I got no support from my family. My husband also had difficulties in allowing me to go for work. But I also got good support from the family in which I worked so now all are happy”.

Ambika on the other hand said, “I brought up my children single handed doing this work. Now that they have grown up they want me to stop. They may be ashamed of me going for this work”.
Lekshmi an untrained worker has other things to cope with. She said, “I am working for the last five years. I go to work because of debt accumulated through running a chitti. With my earnings I repay a part of the debt. But my husband and his family are not interested in me going for domestic work. He is pressurizing me to find some other work although he also knows I am contributing to repaying the debt. Sometimes my friends also remark about me working in someone else’s house and this makes me feel bad. But this is the only option I have”.

The income of the workers is an important component in the household income – several of them being women headed households. Whether the workers are trained or untrained there are some of them who still do not get the respect and place they deserve in the family.

Lucy (UW) said that she and her husband share the family responsibilities together. “Since my husband is a fisherman the amount coming through his income varies. In off seasons in fishing my income is the only income for the family. Otherwise I look after a part of the family expenses and also I have small savings through a chitty.”

Sujatha (TW) said, “In my family both of us have equal roles. My hard work is well accepted by my husband and children. We make all family decisions together. My income is used for paying fees of the children and also to repay loans.”

Usha (TW) said, “I take all the responsibilities of the family after my husband’s death. So for the last 12 years I am managing by myself.”

Many women both trained and untrained hold the main responsibilities of the family or they have an equal role in the family. At explained that they are at least consulted in the family matters. Most of the women pay the debts of the family with their earnings. The children’s education is also managed by their income and it is they who also make small savings through chitties.

Thankam (TW) said, “both of us are working and my husband takes care of the day to day needs of the family. As I get my salary once a month, my income is used to pay the loans we have and also for the tuition fees of my sons.”
Minimol(UW) said, “I started working when my husband had liver problems. He couldn’t go to work for some time. Now he also earns. Both of us equally share the family responsibilities. My income is used for the daily expenses and also I have a chitty.”

Among the trained workers, 44%, of them are considered the head of the household and for the rest, the table highlights an interesting mix where even the son-in-law and in one case the grown up daughter is considered the head of the household.

**Table: 9 Who is considered the Head of your family**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Head of the family</th>
<th>Trained</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Untrained</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
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<td>4.0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son-in-law</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter</td>
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<td>4.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2 **Awareness of Workers’ rights and benefits**

The majority of women who are SEWA members expressed that they became aware of many social issues through the trainings and other meetings in the organizations. They mentioned specifically about their enhanced knowledge on women’s issues and also on workers’ rights. This, according to them, gave them confidence and also helped develop an identity as a worker. They have started expressing themselves in the public.
Leela asserted, “I began to express my opinions freely and began to make my own decisions. I feel that I am a domestic worker and I am proud of it. We have special training sessions on different issues”.

In the work place also they get respect since they are part of an organization and are also trained and responsible workers.

Baby said, “With each year in SEWA I feel I improve myself as a worker and also learn many things about women’s rights and resistance. I am more respected at home and in the work place. The trainings we get have helped me understand more about the society and also to look at society in a different way”.

Shobhana said, “I can take decisions by myself and face society boldly now. I learnt all this in SEWA. I get my salary regularly and I am more respected both in the workplace and in the family”.

Santha said, “I am very conscious of my rights as a domestic worker. I have been working for the last 12 years and wherever I go I am clear about my rights as a worker and as a woman. We have got many classes on social awareness and rights which have helped us to think differently about ourselves”.

Usha very confidently said, “We have participated in several strikes and protest for our rights and also the organization is working for many years to get recognition for domestic workers”.

The untrained workers had no information about any organized approach to their rights apart from their recent experiences with the SEWA-union. They worked as individuals and had no platform to discuss their issues.

5.2.1 Availing of Social security schemes

Since 2010, membership in the Artisans and Skilled Workers Welfare Board is the only available welfare mechanism for domestic workers. Being a member of SEWA union, the majority of workers (both the trained and untrained) have got membership in the Welfare Board. As domestic workers they have all been able to avail of the Rashtriya Swasthya Bhima Yojana which provides health insurance benefits to 5 members in a family. Besides this the SEWA
workers have a small provident fund scheme of Rs. 3 per day to which both they and the clients contribute.

The majority of the untrained workers were not aware of any social security schemes as Shobha said, “I am not aware of any social security schemes for domestic workers and I haven’t got any chance to join any schemes”.

Murukamma said, “I joined the welfare scheme only recently, after becoming a member of SEWA union. Before that I never heard about any schemes for us”.

Saraswathi who had worked for the last 20 years was not a member of any scheme she said, “I am now 55 years old. I am told I am over age to join any scheme. After working so long I will get no benefits”.

To conclude, it is evident that the SEWA workers have been strengthened by their belonging to the organization which has also helped them develop skills and a code of conduct at work. It is important to get the feedback from the clients to see whether the services provided also reflect this and a level of professionalisation.

5.3 Client’s views about domestic workers and the service they receive from the trained workers

This section documents the response of clients who employ workers from SEWA. 15 clients were interviewed. They were selected from different locations of the city as shown below.

Table 10: Geographical locations of the clients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>No. of clients</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>No. of clients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eswaravilasm</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Thirumala</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumarapuram</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kuravankonam</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kowdiyaar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nalanchira</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East fort</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kaithamukku</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srivaraham</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chettikulangara</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sreekaryam</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5.3.1 Service preferences

Most of the clients had engaged workers from 6-10 years while some of them had hired them for longer. There were clients who had engaged more than one worker at a time as they felt that having a trained worker from a good organization was an asset. The clients who engaged workers for different kinds of service and for different periods like full time, just the day and also night workers were interviewed. Many of the clients had also hired untrained workers and one said, “We have employed women from SEWA and also others without training. We find the difference in their approach and skills. We prefer the trained workers”.

Another client said, “There are specific services we need. Both of us are working and we have small children. We want our children to be looked after. We need somebody whom we can trust and take responsibilities of the house so that we can go to work peacefully. Therefore we prefer a trained worker”.

One client said, “My mother is very sick and is bed ridden. I needed somebody who knows to look after such a patient skillfully. When I heard about SEWA from my friends I was really happy and I have found good help there. I prefer workers from SEWA”.

Another client said, “I have been taking the services of SEWA for the past 10 years. Several workers have come to look after my parents. I have not had any problems and I am grateful to the organization. The workers are trained and have a professional attitude towards work.”

One client said “I have a full time worker who stays in our house. She looks after all our household responsibilities. Since I have a very busy work schedule I wanted somebody to care for the children and also to take care of the house. I feel free to tell her how I want things done and she cooperates. Through her I have been able to understand what support she gets from the organization. She has self confidence and a sense of dignity”.
We have to understand here that clients have different needs and demands just as they also have different ways of dealing with the workers and expectations about the services rendered. While some clients are organized and know exactly what level of service they require, there are others who are less organized and therefore also keep changing their demands confusing both the worker and the service provider. Nevertheless, there are always adjustments to be made on both sides and for the most part clients are understanding and willing to help and cooperate. There are also workers who are able to understand the client and adjust accordingly.

The main demands from the clients were that the workers should be trained and punctual and a few felt that they should be able to adjust well with the family. They felt that workers should be able to create a healthy atmosphere and work relationship and most of all, since they are paying so much for the service, they should also get their money’s worth.

One of the clients commented, “I have a full time worker and I pay her Rs. 5000. I am very dependent on her so instead of allowing her an off, I prefer to pay her extra for another day’s work. It is not easy to get somebody who is well trained and dependable like her”.

Another one said, “I need somebody to help me but she must also be able to adjust with my family situations. She should be willing to take responsibility. Some of the SEWA workers are able to do this but not all”.

5.3.2 Opinion about services

Despite the fact that the workers are trained, some of the respondents felt that the services could not be taken for granted. The majority of them had workers for patient care while there were others who had them for child care, cooking and part time cleaning. They felt that the quality of the service depended on the person – a worker either not regular in timings or serviceable depended on the person – some being good and others not.

One client was completely dissatisfied with one woman. She said “I couldn’t tolerate her. I had some very good persons before. But she would not come to work on time and she could not do anything properly. Finally I complained about her and asked for a change”.

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Another client said, “We expect a person who is neat and clean and have basic knowledge of cooking and cleaning”.

One of them expressed, “My father suffers from dementia and we are not at home during the day. We need somebody who can look after him as he needs somebody who understands the illness. Some of the nursing assistants should be specially trained to care for such patients”.

Another client said, “I have two persons looking after my mother, one in the day and the other at night. Since both are from the same organization I can coordinate their work through the organization. It is important that both of them cooperate with each other and share responsibilities. We suffered when we had two from different organizations”.

While the clients are not totally satisfied most of them emphasized that they were glad that there was an organization that cared to train women for domestic services. They suggested that efforts could be made for more specifies training especially in the case of geriatry.

5.3.3 Child Care

Child care is one of the pressing service demands. Since both parents work outside the home, they need reliable people to look after the children. Of the 3 clients who had workers for child care, two felt they were sufficiently trained and good in her interactions with the child while the other was not quite satisfied and said the worker also brought her own problems to work. Both felt the workers had a level of professionalism in their service, a sense of discipline, were methodical, clean and reliable.

One client shared, “We have two children and both of them were looked after by the same woman. We were very satisfied with her service and we could leave everything with her and confidently go to work. My children are happy and are brought up in a very disciplined way, thanks to her”.

Another said, “We were in need of help but were reluctant to take somebody inside our home. We also had bad experience with a couple of workers who had come to work with us. Then someone told us about SEWA and we thought we would try. It has been 12 years now. We are getting excellent service. Those who came are well trained in looking after children. Their
behaviour towards children, care and cleanliness, and disciplining the children are all appreciable. Later we also began taking services for cooking.”

One opined, “taking care of the children is a special skill and workers have to be trained in that way. In our house my daughter couldn’t adjust with one woman, but she likes the other person. My daughter is totally dependent on her”.

One got the impression that in some cases the clients are forced to keep on a worker because the children become totally dependent on them in the absence of the parents.

5.3.4 Patient care

Of the five clients who had workers for patient care, three of them felt that the workers were well trained while two felt they were not. But only two of these clients had demanded workers who were trained. The others had wanted somebody to help. Those that had demanded workers trained in patient care felt that they understood the patient and had a basic knowledge of patient care. All of them were able to read the medicine names and administer the medicine correctly. Four of them said they were very dependable and one of them said they had a very humanitarian approach.

A client who was taking service for more than 10 years for patient care said, “Some workers who have come have performed very professionally. My mother’s Doctor always appreciated them for their service. We cannot blame the organization if some of them do not do well because it depends on a person’s capacity to understand”.

Another client said, “We needed a person to help but we had such bad experiences with the agencies. Hence we were very disappointed and thought we could not expect much. We were pleasantly surprised when we approached SEWA. It has been a different experience for us. The workers are well trained. They seem to have a real expertise in looking after the patients and all their needs. We are really happy about this”.
Another client said, “I had been looking after my mother who needed care. But at one point I thought I needed somebody to be with her during the day when I was out and that I would continue to meet my mother’s needs before and after my work. Hence I went to SEWA and asked for a worker. But I was surprised when I saw her making the bed, helping my mother sit up, putting here in the wheel chair etc. she seemed so professional and I was so relieved. I learnt later that she had been trained to care for the old. I really appreciate the service”.

Basically what the majority of clients consider a priority is a humanitarian attitude towards a patient rather than a skill as one client said, “Apart from all the trainings, what is essential is proper behavior towards the patient. They have to consider the patient with sincerity and commitment. The patient feels this and that itself is a great relief to them.” This indeed is an important quality a professional worker should have but is difficult to take for granted. This could have to do with the fact that these are poor women with all their own emotional and economic needs. While several of them are able to render caring services despite this, there could be a few who really cannot. As another client said, “When they come to work with a depressed face or negative attitude that really puts us off and that makes us lose our confidence in that woman. They certainly face many problems at home, but they have to be able to leave their problems behind when they come to work”.

### 5.3.5 Cooking and Cleaning

Of the 8 clients who had workers for cooking and cleaning, 7 of them felt the workers were trained while one felt she was not. The worker was able to use the gadgets in the house and 6 of them felt that even in cleaning they were professional in their work. All of them felt that the workers could be left alone to manage their chores and from that point were reliable.

One client said, “We wanted somebody who could take some responsibility in cooking and cleaning. We explained our needs to her particularly that we expect her to keep things in order. We are quite satisfied with the way she has adjusted and performs”.

Another said, “We engage a worker to clean once in a week. She does a full cleaning of our house. She uses some gadgets that we have taught her to use and she has learnt well”.
One client had taken services for cleaning, cooking and patient care. She was quite satisfied with the services. She said, “We earlier took services from other agencies. It was difficult as the workers had no training and we had to teach them each time. Since we came to SEWA we are relieved as the workers seem to work in a systematic way. They are also responsible”.

One client who had been utilizing the services of SEWA workers for 7 years said, “We are satisfied with the services we receive but women should be trained in using modern gadgets”.

Another client who is taking the service has a different experience. She says “I am using the service for the last 12 years. We used to get excellent workers in the beginning. Now I feel that the quality is going down. They need more training. One thing is good that we have the options of changing the worker if we don’t like them. We will be happy if we get good services.”

Another client opined that there should be follow up training for the old workers as things are changing fast and the workers should understand the changing needs as well.

Of the 15 clients interviewed 10 of them said that they hired a worker because of the need as they could not manage the work on their own. But they felt this was a major intrusion into the private space of the home and the family and they are wary about this. They also feel that the workers carry news to and from the home and this is undesirable.

All the clients said that they pay the wages on time while 11 of the 15 clients felt that they get their money’s worth in the quality of service rendered, the other 4 felt that they did not. Of these 4, three of them felt that there is not so much work to be done and one of them just felt the charges were exceptionally high. 14 of them said they also gave other assistance to the workers.

5.3.6 Use of uniforms

Right from the beginning SEWA has insisted that its members wear a uniform sari to work. But this has been very difficult to enforce both because the workers feel it is inconvenient or because the clients feel that it is unnecessary. In this case, the interviews with the clients revealed that half of the workers regularly used their uniforms to work while the other half did not.
Most of the clients expressed their opinion about uniforms. Interestingly almost half the clients (46.7%) felt that it was not necessary for the workers to use the uniform while the rest felt that it is important for the workers because it not only gives them a sense of dignity and identity but it also earns them respect.

One client who had engaged services for many years said, “We have two people looking after mother and they are always in their uniforms. People who come to visit my mother always ask about the assistants and their background”.

Another client said, “I know SEWA insists on uniforms and I don’t have any problem with them wearing it. But I don’t insist myself on them wearing it. I let them do as they like”.

One client said, “She is like a member of our house and so why does she need a uniform in our house”? 

So the opinions about the use of the uniform vary. While most of the clients accepted that they liked the workers to use the uniform, they did not think they have to insist that the workers wear it. Hence the workers also take their liberties where as organizationally SEWA insists on uniforms. A few clients clearly said that the use of a uniform definitely brings dignity and respect to the women workers. Nevertheless, several clients suggested a change in the color of the uniform as the present off white saree gets easily dirty. “Please give them a darker colour” they said. The table below indicates the client’s preferences.

**Table 11: Clients opinion about wearing the uniform**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Should the worker wear the uniform</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>
It is quite clear from these responses that it is the clients that determine the quality of service they receive. If they are able to accept the organizational norms and demand a level of professionalism, then the workers will also deliver. But as several clients continue to see domestic work as ‘just house work’ without any specific significance, then the workers also do not feel they are required to deliver a professional service.

5.3.7 Clients Opinion Regarding Wages

The clients normally paid wages on time. The majority of them opined that if the workers come regularly and on time they are very happy to pay good wages. A few of them felt that the present wages, Rs. 150 a day, was high. Others accepted the wage increments as the cost of living increases as indicated in the table below.

**Table 12: Whether client feels justified in paying the demanded wages.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As stated earlier, many of the clients extend all kinds of assistance to the workers. Some thus justify this with paying lower wages, but others are very generous as they understand the difficulties of the workers.

**Table 13: Whether clients extend other help to the workers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Give other help</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>93.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10 of the clients paid wages directly to the office while 5 sent it through the workers to the office. Workers do not get their wages from the office unless the clients have paid up but there are cases of the regular clients keeping a balance with the office. 11 of the 15 clients felt that it is more sensible to pay the worker through the office because this not only reduced the dependence of the worker on the client but also gave the office and the worker greater responsibility towards the client as one of them said, “I prefer to give the salary through the office. That gives both the office and the worker a responsibility towards us. It also means the worker does not make too many demands on us as we can refer back to the office. This makes the service more professional too”.

Others had similar opinions. “I send the money to the office through the worker themselves as it is difficult for me to go to the office. They make the payment and bring us the receipts. We are pleased about the system of paying the wages to the office. When we are not satisfied with the service or stop the service the office makes us a refund”.

Another client said, “I think it is a pity that some people pay the workers directly and make them leave the organization. We also should have a sense of responsibility to the organization. We feel that the workers are also responsible to their organization”.

Yet another client said, “It is only normal that the workers only get their salary from the office if we pay. So we try to make the payment by the 1st of the month itself as we feel that the workers should get their wages on time”.

It must be said here that the clients that were interviewed had domestic workers working for them presently from SEWA. But there are a substantial number of clients who now employ the worker they got from SEWA directly as they have either created dependencies or are reluctant to pay the monthly service charge to the organization.

5.3.8 Prevalence of availability over need

Women workers are not readily available for full time and night services. Workers prefer to work during the day time and go back home s they have household responsibilities too. The pressing
needs of the clients on the one hand and non availability of workers on the other also cause complex worker-employer relationships.

One client said, “Since it is difficult to get services for the night we are often at the mercy of the worker. So we agree with whatever limitations they have”.

Another said, “It is difficult to get workers that we like. We take whoever is available as we have no other choice as we are unable to go to work if we do not have help”.

Another client expressed, “My mother is too sick and I am alone at home. I needed a full time service. It is very difficult to get full time workers. Hence I am willing to compromise”.

As the workers decide to go to work because of their own family needs, they are also unable to make adjustments according to the needs. They are under great pressures in their own families and their families are also a priority for them.

5.3.9 Considering domestic workers as workers

It was important to understand how the clients actually view the domestic workers. When clients were asked whether domestic workers are workers, they responded as below.

Table 14: Whether clients think domestic workers are workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are domestic workers, workers</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the clients were asked whether domestic work is a work like other work and therefore that the domestic workers also have rights like all other workers, they answered as below.
### Table 15: Clients opinion about domestic work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It’s a work like other work</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DW has dignity</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One client who engaged a worker for cooking and child care remarked, “They are part of our house and we treat them well. The already get so much of money and benefits from us, so what more do they need?” She felt that giving them a paid off was unnecessary.

One client said, “I fully agree that such workers deserve respect. Domestic work is a decent work. Since I have lived abroad for many years, I agree that this is also a work where the worker should have all the rights”.

Most clients happily welcomed the need to improve the status of domestic workers and securing recognition for them. They were pleased that some organizations are working towards this at national and international levels.

### 5.3.10 Clients’ opinion about SEWA

Despite some of the clients having negative experiences with the workers and not being fully satisfied with the services, all of them were clearly appreciative of the services of the organization and felt that this was an answer to a growing need in the society. They positively commented on the house visits and also phone calls from the office. They claimed to have a good relation with the office as one client opined, “There is a good atmosphere in the office where we can go and discuss our problems regarding the services. The office staff are open and they try to negotiate with the worker to render better service without antagonizing the worker on whom we are dependent”.

Another said, “The office calls us when the workers have any problems with us and this gives us a chance to clarify and sort things out”.

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While some clients felt the workers should have a sense of belonging to the organization, others remarked that there are sometimes too many meetings for the workers when they stay off from work.

5.3.11 Clients’ awareness about the rights of the domestic workers

80% of the clients had heard already that there is now an ILO Convention for Domestic Workers. Most of them were keen to understand more about it and when explained to, they were appreciative for such a progressive stance. On hearing about the fact that there was now a draft National Policy for domestic Workers that gave these workers rights like other workers in the unorganized sector, they were also appreciative of this. 86% of them said they would be willing to make contributions to the domestic workers welfare board if this would meet the social security needs of the workers. While this was a positive sign, only 66% of them said they agreed to give them one day off a week with pay. This is something unimaginable for a section of the public.

Table 16: Whether clients agree with weekly paid offs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paid weekly offs</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As stated earlier, the clients that were interviewed were all already hiring services from SEWA and were used to the norms of the organization. Hence they could speak openly about the quality of services they received. The majority of them preferred trained workers and felt they had a certain degree of professionalism. But the positive attitude towards giving them higher wages and contributing towards their social security was also because this section of the clients could afford to pay for the services and are in dire need of domestic help. The responses would have
been different had the clients who hire untrained workers been interviewed. Hence we can conclude that as workers get trained and demand higher wages, the category of clients who can afford to hire them will also be the upper classes. But since there is a great demand, the workers can also expect the wages to increase.

5.4 Placement Agencies

Many women who seek work for the first time feel more secure to do so through a placement agency as they themselves do not have access to clients. Some of them continue with the agency while others give up, depending on how the agency treats them or how secure they feel to find work themselves.

Bindu who is an untrained worker said, “I needed work urgently and other women had told me I could go to an office called Nanma in Kunchalumoodu and they would give me work. So I just went and registered there and that same day they sent me to a house. I am paid Rs.4000 a month and the agency deducts Rs. 200. I do the work because I need the money but it is hard work and they do not give me any food for the whole day’s work. But I cannot complain to anybody. There are also lots of other deductions in between. They say it is for rent charges, electricity charges, meetings etc.” Bindu had no information on workers’ rights and is also not part of any social security scheme other than the RSBY.

Shanta, a trained worker goes to work through another agency called Akshaya. She has been working for the last 15 years. She got three days training in cooking. She said, “In the training I learnt cooking and I got confidence to go out and work. But I first was sent to look after a child. Gradually I learnt other things. Now I feel very confident. Agency deducts Rs.25 from my monthly salary”. While Shanta was more confident, she did not seem to have any other information on her worker’s rights and women’s rights and was not a member of any welfare scheme.

Lexy an untrained worker also said she first went to work through an agency but she gradually went to work on her own.
Rajitha who was working in a hotel originally joined an agency called ‘Aradhana’ and started going for domestic work. She said, ‘they placed me in a house then I continued in that house and did not go back to the agency. From there I went to other houses with the help of this owner’.

As a part of this study, 29 agencies functioning in different parts of Trivandrum were identified. Most of them were registered recently under the Charitable Societies Act. They advertise themselves through small hoardings in different parts of the city to solicit women to work and also the clients. They recruit women inside and outside Kerala for full-time, part-time and daytime work. Generally none of them give the women any training. Some give 3 days of class as a preparation to go to work like how to behave in the house and in the agency, rules and regulations etc.

Aiswarya, Vellayambalam is functioning under the Trivandrum Social Service Society (A Church institution) for the last 12 years. They offer services for cleaning, cooking, patient care, child care and postnatal care. The daily wage for patient care services are Rs. 180 and full time is Rs.6400 and the workers get two days leave every four months. Wage for cleaning and cooking services is Rs. 150. Their registration fee is Rs.250 with Rs.100 service charge per month. There is no uniform and training. They call the nursing assistants once in six months to update on their services.

Akshaya, in Mudavanmughal is run by a woman who was an ex worker of SEWA. They take a registration fee of Rs. 750 which has a three month validity. After that the clients have to pay Rs.100 per month. The workers salary ranges from 130-160 a day. They do not have uniform and training; instead they give an orientation of three days about the rules and regulations and also how to behave in the workplace.

Aradhana in Kesavadasapuram has only recently started. They take a registration fee of Rs.500 for three months thereafter with a monthly renewal of Rs.100The salary for patient care is Rs. 180 and cooking is Rs.170. they provide both male and female workers. They advertise for both workers and clients. The workers are required to submit copies of their voter ID card, Ration card and photo in the agency at time of registration.
Santhwana, Murinjapalam also sends workers for all the services. They specify a working time from 8am to 4pm. The registration fee is Rs.500 for three months and thereafter Rs.100 per month. The workers salary varies from Rs. 170-200 a day.

Sukratha, Jacob’s junction, statue provides both men and women workers. They demand Rs.7500 salary for full time work. The agency takes a registration charge of Rs.1000 for 3 months which is renewed with the same amount for the next three months.

Nanma, Pappanamcode provides women for both full time and part time services. They demand a salary between Rs.140-180 for different kinds of work. The agency takes Rs.50 for each Rs.1000 the women earn.

Karunya, Kunnukuzhy is one of the older agencies also started by one of the staff of SEWA around 14 years ago. They take a registration fee is Rs. 1000 for three months and thereafter Rs.600 for the next three months. They charge Rs.7000 per month for a full time worker who is entitled to two offs a month. On a daily basis the workers receive Rs.170 for day services and 180 for night. If they are not provided with food an extra Rs.50 is charged. The women who come to the organization have to submit their photo, ID card copy and councilors’ letter. The agency intervenes in cases of any problems in the client’s house related to work.

Relax, Thirumala offers workers for full time and part time services. Full time workers get Rs.6000 as salary. The salary is expected to be remitted in advance and in any case the clients are not able to go to office the agency collects the money from the houses directly. The agency charges a registration fee of Rs. 500 for one year.

Abaya, Peroorkada provides for part time, day and full time services. There is one day off with pay in a month if the worker works for the whole month. The salary is paid through the office. Registration fees is Rs.500 for three months and Rs.100 every month after that.

To get details about the agencies was a difficult process. Information had to be collected indirectly. All these agencies started as profit making groups. Some of them that we know through the workers, not only take initial contributions form the workers but they also make deductions from the workers wages on a monthly basis which they do not reveal. Most of them do not know anything about domestic services except that there is demand and they just match
the demand and supply. The workers also are not very concerned as what they want are the wages and not too much supervision; hence they are willing to make payments to the agencies initially. But very soon they understand that they are being exploited and then they start to go to work directly. Many clients also eventually prefer to deal with women directly.

The atmosphere in most of these agencies is not worker friendly or women friendly. The agencies are in competition to get the maximum number of clients in order to get their profits. They don’t feel that they have any role in workers’ rights or understanding the domestic worker as a worker. There is no transparency in the functioning of these agencies. (The name of the agencies and their phone numbers are in the annexure)
6.1 Conclusions

With more women going to work outside the home, with the ageing population increasing and with larger migrations to urban areas both the demand for and supply of domestic workers is on the rise. While some of these workers are at the mercy of exploitative placement agencies, there are efforts to organize the workers so that they get a better deal. There are some organizations that have also tried to further develop the skills of domestic workers so that they can demand better wages while delivering better services.

With the passing of ILO Convention 189 – Decent Work for Domestic Workers (2011), this section of workers has now gained visibility and will have rights like all other workers. The Government of India has developed a Draft Policy for Social Protection of Domestic Workers that still has to be notified. This will finally help this section of workers to secure the protection that all other workers obtain.

SEWA-Kerala and the Red Cross have been two organizations in Kerala that tried to organize domestic workers and deliver more professional services. SEWA particularly aims at professionalizing the services while also developing a professional consciousness in the workers and working towards a minimum social security. As a trade union it has also lobbied for the rights of these workers.

The fact that domestic services can be professionalized is challenged by many. The underlying reason could be the age old patriarchal premise that domestic work is ‘natural’ for women. Nevertheless that domestic work also requires a skill, is time consuming and is imperative for the regeneration of the family is proven by the increasing demand for such services. Training women to undertake such work professionally requires a code of conduct both for the worker and the employer. This is what SEWA has aimed to do these last years and an assessment of this process has revealed the following:

The demand for more specialized service is on the increase particularly for caring for children and looking after the aged and sick. Cleaning and cooking is a regular requirement where the use
of modern gadgets and orderliness calls for better training. As demand is high, employers are willing to make allowances and thereby break organizational codes of timings, the wearing of uniforms and providing personal incentives to the workers.

There is great diversity among employers. Whereas the majority are inclined to respect the autonomy of the worker and see her as providing a professional service, there are some who are unable to distinguish between treating the worker well or treating her like a member of the family thereby also confusing the worker regarding what she needs to do and how she does it. Such blurred divisions make it difficult to accept the home as a work place and to clearly demarcate the worker’s work time and responsibilities especially with live-in/full time workers.

Employers who have been utilizing the services of the SEWA members for the most part are aware of the fact that there will soon be a legislation protecting the rights of these workers as a result of the ILO Convention 189. While most welcome such developments and are willing to contribute towards their social security, the majority of them are reluctant to give the workers a paid weekly off.

The majority of employers are appreciative of the services that SEWA provides although they understand that despite the trainings, the delivery of services also depends on the worker and her ability to adjust to the family needs. Whereas they understand that the workers are also under great pressure from their own families, they expect that workers are reliable and inform them when they cannot go to work.

From the point of view of the workers, a large number of them consider it an extension of their housework and therefore do not see the need for any training. They also have no idea about their rights or minimum wages but choose to go to work in their own neighbourhoods, working in several houses for a few hours a day so that they earn as much as possible.

Around 40% of the women who go in for domestic work are single heads of the household. A section of women have been working as domestic workers from childhood. They have been obliged by circumstances to go to work and domestic work was the only means of an indispensable income for them.
All the trained workers who were members of SEWA stated that it was the support of the organization and the training it offers that gave them confidence and equipped them with skills to go to work. They understand that they are workers. They have thus also been able to communicate better from the point of view of their rights to regulated work.

The training had also given them a clearer idea about themselves, the society they live in and also a skill which has given them a sense of dignity, thereby also bringing respectability to the work.

The workers of SEWA are obliged to follow a norm regarding wages which means that some of the poor workers are guaranteed the stated wage while the better workers are not better rewarded for their enhanced services. On the other hand, the untrained workers either loose out because they have no organizational backing to demand the minimum wage while the good worker can also demand a higher wage from a client who is willing to pay for the services. Both the trained and untrained workers are not satisfied with their wages and it is evident that they struggle to keep the family going. As the cost of living increases, workers are in need of more money.

The majority of the workers spend a large part of their wages on transport to work. The distance also causes punctuality problems. Untrained workers are able to access work in their neighborhoods hence prefer to go to work directly. This is not guaranteed when they go to work through an agency. They have to take the work that comes to them on a priority basis and hence they also have long distances to travel.

Most of the workers preferred to go to work through an agency in the initial stages as they feel they will find a safe work place. But once they have found confidence they leave the agency and pursue work on their own.

Most of the trained women felt secure at the workplace. The untrained respondents though initially reluctant to reveal said the major problems they faced were over work and lack of food.

Sexual harassment has been mentioned by both groups of workers. This kind of harassment varies from comments, to men putting their hands on the workers bodies, and in some extreme cases even asking them for sex. The untrained workers prefer to leave a household rather than
report it while the SEWA women would bring the issue to the organization. Nevertheless, such cases have been few in SEWA.

The Agencies in Trivandrum seem to have developed their business model on the SEWA model in the way they charges a registration fee and collect the wages. In this way, SEWA has probably set a standard. There was a time when more agencies were mushrooming and they made a quick buck and even disappeared. For those that remain most of them have been forced to register themselves and they have done so under the Charitable Societies Act. But as they are mainly individual based, they are not transparent with their accounting and hence make deductions from the workers that are not traceable. Nevertheless, when workers realize they are being exploited, they easily move on.

Professionalising domestic work while possible and desirable has still a long way to go as its delivery needs to be understood both in the way the employer engages with the worker and the manner in which the worker delivers the service. This is a very unorganised sector where only very basic norms regarding employer employee relations can be. As the home is always a private space the onus is on the worker to understand this and develop a code of conduct in the delivery of the service. Belonging to an organization certainly strengthens the worker to access her rights. Now that there is an ILO Convention that recognizes domestic work as work and that domestic workers have rights like all other workers, the legislative base for the defense of such workers will give the workers an enhanced social status as well.
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