



Hands That Hold Homes

Rights, Resilience and Future of Domestic Workers

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Hands That Hold Homes

Rights, Resilience and Future of Domestic Workers

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Seven Years of Rights and Resilience: The Future of Domestic Workers in Bangladesh

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Invisible Work, Essential Rights

Across Bangladesh, domestic workers make other people's working lives possible. They cook, clean, care for children, support older people and hold together the daily rhythms of households. Yet for decades, this work has remained among the least visible forms of labour, performed inside private homes, shaped by gender and poverty, and often excluded from the protections that define decent work.

The ILO describes domestic work as care and household services performed in or for households and estimates that 75.6 million people are employed in this sector globally, most of them women; 81 percent are informally employed.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the statistical picture remains uneven. Around 10.5 million domestic workers nationally, approximately 90 percent of whom are women, while 1.8 million women domestic workers in Dhaka. These figures should be read as indicators of scale rather than an exact settlement of the question, as domestic work is informal, mobile and often unregistered. The Bangladesh Labour Force Survey 2024 provides the latest official labour-market reference, but its industry category "Activities of households as employers" is

not directly comparable with broader rights-sector estimates of domestic work. This matters because invisibility in data often becomes invisibility in law, budgets and services.

This invisibility has consequences. The 2019 baseline of Securing Rights of Women Domestic Workers in Bangladesh project, also known as SUNITI, found that 95 percent of live-in and 82 percent of live-out women domestic workers were not aware of laws or policies protecting domestic workers' rights. It also found widespread vulnerability to verbal, physical and sexual abuse, low access to support, weak bargaining power, limited education and almost no written employment arrangements. The findings confirmed what domestic-worker movements had long argued: the issue was not only low income, but a deeper denial of recognition, voice and protection.

Why SUNITI Mattered

When the SUNITI project began, the need was stark. The project baseline found that 58 percent of live-in and 61 percent of live-out women domestic workers surveyed had no formal education. Forty-two percent of live-in and 30.5 percent of live-out workers

reported experiencing violence or abuse in the workplace. Awareness of protection was extremely low.

The baseline also showed what workers themselves wanted most: better wages, weekly leave without wage deduction, fixed working hours and safe workplaces. These were not abstract demands. They were the basic conditions of decent work.

The Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of Bangladesh had already adopted the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy 2015, a significant policy step that recognised domestic work as labour and referred to rest, recreation, safe working environments, registration and welfare measures. But the policy was not enough. Domestic workers remained largely outside the enforceable protections of the Bangladesh Labour Act, and Bangladesh had not ratified ILO Convention 189 on decent work for domestic workers. SUNITI therefore entered a space where policy recognition existed, but legal enforceability, implementation and social acceptance lagged behind.

A Seven-Year Intervention

Funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by Oxfam with project partners, SUNITI aimed to improve the wellbeing of women domestic workers in Dhaka. Running from 2019 to 2026, the expected results were clear, women domestic workers would be more empowered and organised to claim and defend their rights, and employers, communities, government and wider society would increasingly support protection and recognition of domestic work as a formal profession.

The project's strength was that it worked across levels. With partners including Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies

Suniti in numbers

- 22,517 women domestic workers reached across 866 support groups
- 18,490 participants completed life-skills training.
- 16,000 participants completed occupational-skills training.
- 672 employers were sensitised on the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy 2015.
- Domestic Workers National Forum-Bangladesh strengthened its organisational presence, including government registration.



(BILS), Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), HelloTask, RedOrange, Underprivileged Children's Education Programs (UCEP), Dushtha Shasthya Kendra (DSK) and Karmojibi Nari (KN), SUNITI combined rights awareness, life-skills training, occupational-skills development, worker groups, employer engagement, digital and platform linkage, community mobilisation and national advocacy. The approach understood that change inside private households cannot be delivered by training alone. It requires workers who know their rights, employers who understand their responsibilities, communities that refuse to normalise abuse, and institutions able to act.

What Changed

The project did not make informal work simple. But it helped create new pathways for women who had long been expected to negotiate alone. The final evaluation found that awareness of domestic-worker rights increased substantially. Awareness of the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy rose from 12 percent at baseline to 74 percent at endline. The share of workers reporting ability to negotiate wages increased from 23 percent to 61 percent, and written contracts increased from 8 percent to 28 percent.

Economic changes were also visible. The final evaluation reported that 41 percent of surveyed workers had secured higher wages, with an average monthly increase of BDT 850, while 24 percent gained non-wage benefits. Paid leave increased from 4 percent at baseline to 17 percent at endline, and the proportion earning more than BDT 5,000 rose from 8 percent to 29 percent. These figures should be understood as contribution evidence. SUNITI helped strengthen knowledge, confidence, skills and negotiation spaces that made such improvements more possible.

Equally important were gains in voice. Worker participation in advocacy and union-related spaces increased from 5 percent to 27 percent. The formation and government registration of the Domestic Workers National Forum helped move domestic workers from being treated as beneficiaries to being recognised as rights-holders and advocates. Zonal forums, national conferences, advisory spaces and leadership training created platforms through which domestic workers could speak to policymakers, employers and civil society in their own collective voice.

The project also contributed to employer awareness and community accountability. Employer awareness increased from 18 percent to 53 percent in the final evaluation. At the same time, the evaluation was clear that attitude change did not always become practice: only a portion of trained employers made tangible changes, and resistance to written contracts remained strong. This is one of SUNITI's most important lessons. In private households, rights do not travel through law alone. They require repeated awareness, trusted intermediaries, community monitoring, accessible complaint pathways and social pressure against abuse.

A Historic But Partial Legal Opening

The policy landscape changed significantly during the final phase of SUNITI. Oxfam and partners presented recommendations to the Labour Reform Commission in December 2024, including stronger legal protection for informal workers, ratification of relevant ILO conventions, minimum wage standards, access to social safety nets, workplace safety monitoring and enforcement mechanisms as reported by The Business Standard. The Labour Reform Commission's 2025 report placed domestic workers

within a wider reform agenda on legal protection for formal and informal workers, national and sectoral wages, safe work, worker registration, organising rights, social security, gender equality and access to justice.

The most important legal development came with the Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2026 by the Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Division. The official Laws of Bangladesh text confirms that the Act, adopted as Act No. 43 of 2026 on April 10, 2026, inserted a definition of “Domestic Worker” and amended the Labour Act’s application clause so that domestic workers are no longer wholly outside the law for selected chapters. The project has significantly contributed to the formation of the law.

This amendment is historic because it moves domestic workers from policy recognition toward legal recognition. But it is still partial, the amendment opens pathways in areas such as employment-injury compensation, trade union rights and labour-dispute resolution, while leaving major protections to future rules, subordinate legislation and implementation systems.

Lessons From SUNITI

First, organising informal women workers begins with trust. Domestic workers often work alone, move between employers and have limited time. Worker groups created spaces for learning, confidence and collective identity.

Second, legal awareness works best when it becomes practical negotiation. SUNITI’s rights training mattered because it connected policy language to wages, leave, rest, respectful behaviour, written terms and help-seeking.

Third, skills development is a dignity strategy. Occupational and life-skills training helped workers see domestic work as skilled work and supported stronger bargaining. The project’s contribution to curricula, competency standards and digital learning points toward wider skills recognition.

Fourth, employer engagement is necessary but insufficient. Employers must be reached, but awareness alone cannot substitute for written agreements, grievance systems and institutional accountability.

Fifth, advocacy is strongest when workers are organised. SUNITI helped create platforms where domestic workers could engage communities, civil society and policymakers as leaders, not only as beneficiaries.

The Road Ahead

Bangladesh now needs to convert recognition into enforceable rights. The first priority is implementation of the 2026 amendment through clear, practical and gender-responsive Labour Rules. These should establish simplified written contracts, standard employment records, a domestic-worker and employer registration system, accessible complaint channels, alternative dispute resolution, referral pathways and flexible evidence procedures suited to household-based work.

The second priority is economic protection. Domestic workers need a credible minimum wage mechanism, periodic wage review, paid leave, protection from wage deduction, compensation access, social protection, health support, maternity protection and pathways into skills certification. These are not benefits at the margins; they are the architecture of decent work.

The third priority is institutional accountability. Ministry of Labour and Employment, Department of Labour, Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, local government, police, labour courts, legal aid actors, skills authorities and worker organisations need defined roles. A worker database can support policy and services, but it must protect privacy and avoid creating new barriers for workers.

Finally, the community infrastructure built through SUNITI should be sustained. Women domestic-worker groups, peer leaders, zonal forums, the Domestic Workers National Forum, referral systems, employer-awareness work and community monitoring can keep rights alive beyond the project cycle. Continued donor and development-partner investment is essential at this stage, because the hardest work begins after recognition: implementation, enforcement, behaviour change and scale.

SUNITI's story is not simply about a project ending. It is about a movement becoming more visible at a decisive moment. Over seven years, the project contributed to stronger agency, better awareness, improved negotiation, expanded skills, employer engagement, worker organisation and a more enabling policy environment. The future of domestic-worker rights in Bangladesh will depend on whether these gains are carried forward into law, institutions and everyday household practice.

The hands that hold homes have held the economy quietly for generations. The next chapter must ensure that those hands are protected, valued and heard.

MESSAGE



Md. Abdur Rahman Tarafder
Secretary
Ministry of Labour and Employment
Government of the People's
Republic of Bangladesh

Domestic workers make an essential contribution to households, communities and the wider economy of Bangladesh. Yet, for many years, their work has remained largely invisible and undervalued, leaving many women domestic workers with limited bargaining power and inadequate protection of their rights.

The Suniti project has contributed to changing this reality by working alongside women domestic workers to strengthen their awareness, skills, agency and collective voice, while engaging the government, employers, civil society actors and other stakeholders. The experiences documented in this publication demonstrate that meaningful change is possible when women workers are supported to understand their rights, organise collectively and participate in decisions affecting their lives and work.

The progress achieved is important not only for the women directly involved, but also for Bangladesh's broader journey towards decent work and gender equality. The increased confidence, expertise and collective participation of women domestic workers demonstrate that they are not merely beneficiaries, but rights holders and important actors in shaping change.

Bangladesh has reached a significant milestone through the Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2026, which formally recognises domestic workers as workers. The priority now is to translate this legal recognition into effective protection and improved working conditions through, occupational safety and health, social

protection, accessible grievance mechanisms, and protection from violence and harassment.

This will require sustained collaboration among the government, domestic workers and their organisations, employers, the civil society and development partners. This publication captures an important part of that journey, bringing together evidence, experiences and voices that can inform future policy and practice.

I appreciate the contribution of Oxfam in Bangladesh, its partners and Global Affairs Canada, and particularly acknowledge the women domestic workers whose leadership and determination have been central to this journey.

I hope this publication will contribute to continued dialogue and action towards ensuring that every domestic worker in Bangladesh enjoys recognition, protection, dignity and decent working conditions.

MESSAGE



His Excellency Ajit Singh
High Commissioner of Canada to
Bangladesh

Domestic workers are essential contributors to Bangladesh's care economy and an important part of its workforce. Across the country, women domestic workers provide indispensable support that enables families and communities to participate in education, employment, and the broader economy. While domestic work has historically been undervalued and insufficiently protected, important progress is being made to strengthen recognition of domestic workers' rights and contributions.

Canada is proud to have supported the *Securing Rights for Women Domestic Workers in Bangladesh* project. Implemented in Bangladesh by Oxfam and its partners, the initiative demonstrates what can be achieved when women's rights, economic empowerment, skills development, collective action, and policy engagement are pursued together.

The results are encouraging. Women domestic workers have strengthened knowledge of labour rights, enhanced skills, increased confidence to negotiate fair working conditions, and expanded participation in worker groups and support networks. At the same time, employers now have greater recognition of fair employment practices, including written and more structured working arrangements. Perhaps more importantly, many women are now serving as leaders and advocates for their profession, helping to advance greater dignity and respect for domestic work.

Bangladesh has also reached an important policy milestone. The recognition of domestic

workers as workers under the Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2026 marks a historic step forward. The priority now is to translate this recognition into effective protection through the promotion of fair working conditions, occupational safety, social protection, access to grievance mechanisms, and protection from violence and harassment.

This publication highlights the progress that is possible through collaboration and shared commitment. I commend the domestic workers whose resilience and leadership have been the heart of this journey, together with the Government of Bangladesh, Oxfam, and all partners who have supported these efforts.

Canada remains committed to supporting inclusive economic growth and opportunities that enable individuals and communities to contribute to and benefit from development. As Bangladesh continues to strengthen protections for domestic workers, continued collaboration among government, civil society, employers, workers and development partners will be essential to ensuring that those who contribute so much to households and the economy can work in conditions of safety and dignity.

Canada looks forward to continuing to work with Bangladesh to make further progress in this area as it will undoubtedly lead to deeper bilateral ties, unlock more trade and investment, and most important of all, create a better future for people in both our countries.

MESSAGE



Anil Pant

Interim Country Director
Oxfam in Bangladesh

For too long, domestic work has been looked down upon. It is performed largely by women, behind closed doors, and shaped by unequal power relations that can ensue different kinds of exploitation without recognition. The Securing Rights for Women Domestic Workers in Bangladesh Project began from a premise that domestic work is like any other work and domestic workers have rights too whose labour that contribute to sustains our homes, communities and economy.

Since 2019, Oxfam in Bangladesh and partners, with support from the Global Affairs Canada, have worked alongside women domestic workers to strengthen their agency, skills, organization and access to support, while engaging employers, government, civil society and the wider public. The results are significant. Rights awareness increased from 12 to 74 percent, the ability to negotiate wages from 23 to 61 percent, and participation in worker groups from 5 to 31 percent. Peer support also expanded dramatically. These figures represent women gaining knowledge, confidence, bargaining power and solidarity.

A central lesson is that empowerment cannot depend on individual courage alone. A woman should not have to risk losing her livelihood simply because she asks for fair wages, defined working hours, safety and respect. Rights must be converted to entitlements supported by systems, institutions and accountability.

The Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2026, which formally recognizes domestic workers as workers, marks a historic advancement. Now the focus must move from recognition to effective protection. The Labour Rules and future reforms must make rights real through employment documentation, fair wage standards, accessible grievance mechanisms, occupational safety, social protection, protection from violence and harassment, and stronger institutional responsibility.

This book is therefore not simply a record of a project coming to an end. It is an evidence of what has changed, a platform for the voices and leadership of domestic workers, and a reminder of what remains unfinished. The stories in these pages ask all of us, government, employers, worker organizations, civil society, development partners and citizens, to see domestic work differently and to act accordingly.

I thank all female domestic workers who trusted this initiative, challenged injustice and helped shape its direction. Their leadership must remain at the centre of the journey ahead together.

MESSAGE



Jessica Hum

Manager, International Programs
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Most of the world's care work is performed by women, yet much of it remains unrecognised and undervalued, with care workers often facing low wages and poor working conditions. The Securing Rights for Women Domestic Workers in Bangladesh project, also called the Suniti project, has demonstrated what is possible when care work and the labour of women domestic workers are recognised as essential to building a more gender-just and inclusive economy and society.

Oxfam Canada is honoured to have contributed to this important journey alongside Oxfam in Bangladesh, Global Affairs Canada, our partners and, above all, the 22,517 women domestic workers themselves. Through skills training, collective action, efforts to shift public perceptions, and engagement with decision-makers to influence policies, the Suniti project has brought greater visibility to domestic work while strengthening women domestic workers' voices in advocating for their rights and decent working conditions. The policy gains that strengthened multisectoral relationships and the collective organising built through this work are an essential part of the project's legacy.

Our experience with Suniti has affirmed the importance of projects and partnerships grounded in feminist and rights-based approaches, shared learning, accountability, adaptability, and a commitment to shifting power. As we celebrate the progress achieved, we also recognise that many challenges

still remain and the achievements must be sustained and built upon to advance decent work and labour justice for all in Bangladesh.

Oxfam Canada will continue to advocate for care and domestic work to be recognised and valued as decent work, and for women domestic workers in Bangladesh and around the world to fully realize and claim their rights. The experiences and commitment of the women domestic workers throughout the Securing Rights project provide both the foundation and the motivation for carrying this work forward.

MESSAGE FROM SUNITI PARTNERS



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As partners of the Securing Rights for Women Domestic Workers in Bangladesh project, we have had the privilege of walking alongside thousands of women whose work sustains households, but whose contribution has too often been overlooked. We have seen that change begins when women learn, organise, support one another and speak for themselves.

Since 2019, this partnership has brought together complementary strengths in community mobilisation, skills development, worker organising, legal support, employer engagement, research, communications, job pathways and policy advocacy. Training centres and community hubs became more than places for learning. They became spaces where women could discuss wages, rights, safety and aspirations without fear, where peer leaders emerged, and where individual experiences gradually became a collective agenda for lasting change.

The scale matters greatly, but the transformation behind the numbers matters even more. More women now understand their rights, negotiate their wages, participate in groups, access peer support and take pride in their profession. Employers have also begun to reconsider long-standing assumptions about domestic work. Through dialogue, storytelling and practical models of ethical employment, the project has helped demonstrate that dignity, trust and professionalism benefit workers and employers alike.

We are especially encouraged by the growing leadership of domestic workers themselves and by the establishment of structures through which that leadership can continue. At the same time, we know the work is unfinished. Live-in workers remain difficult to reach. Written contracts are still far from universal. Fair wages, social protection, protection from violence, accessible grievance mechanisms and sustainable financing for organising, legal aid and support services require continued attention.

The formal recognition of domestic workers under the Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2026 creates an important new foundation. The next responsibility is collective: to ensure that the Labour Rules and their implementation convert legal recognition into protections that women can experience in their everyday working lives.

This book carries forward the knowledge, courage and relationships built through the project. We dedicate it first to the women domestic workers who trusted us, challenged us and led alongside us. As partners, we remain committed to protecting the gains made, strengthening worker-led institutions, supporting effective implementation and keeping domestic workers' rights, dignity and leadership at the centre of Bangladesh's future of decent work.



A Journey of Trust, Dignity and Collective Transformation

Tarek Aziz, Programme Coordinator, Oxfam in Bangladesh



Perhaps no form of work remains more invisible, undervalued, and misunderstood in Bangladesh and across Asia than domestic work. Every day, millions of women care for children, support older persons, prepare meals, and perform the essential work that enables households, communities, and economies to function. Yet their contributions have historically received too little recognition, protection, and investment.

The Suniti Project began with a belief that this reality could change.

At its heart, Suniti was never only about training or employment. It was about recognizing women domestic workers as workers, rights holders, leaders, and agents of change. It was about challenging social norms that have long kept domestic workers invisible and creating opportunities for women to build confidence, exercise agency, and strengthen their collective voice.

When the project began, many questioned whether such change was possible. How could highly mobile domestic workers be organized? How could women with little or no formal education engage in skills training, leadership development, and collective action? Although I joined the project several months after its inception, these challenges became a constant source of motivation. Together with our partners and domestic workers themselves, we worked to prove that when trust and opportunity are created, transformation follows.

Building trust was our first challenge. Many domestic workers were understandably cautious, shaped by years of exclusion and unfulfilled promises. We listened more than we spoke, remained present in communities, and gradually earned their confidence. Over time, Suniti became their project as much as ours.

The stories I encountered changed me deeply. Behind every participant was a story of resilience, sacrifice, and determination. These experiences reminded me that development is not only about activities and results. It is about people whose aspirations, struggles, and contributions often remain unseen.

One of Suniti's greatest achievements was the emergence of leadership. Through hundreds of community groups, women began organizing, supporting one another, and finding their collective voice. I still remember a domestic worker proudly saying, *"When a Prime Minister proudly introduces herself as a Prime Minister, I too proudly introduce myself as a domestic worker. I am a skilled worker, and I am proud of my profession."* That moment captured the essence of Suniti: dignity, confidence, and self-recognition.

The journey was not without challenges. From the COVID-19 pandemic to changing social and political realities, we continuously adapted and learned. These experiences reinforced an important lesson: lasting change requires persistence, partnership, and collective action.

As I reflect on the journey, I remain hopeful about the future. The most important legacy of Suniti is not only the skills developed, institutions strengthened, or policies influenced. It is the confidence, leadership, and collective power that thousands of domestic workers now carry with them. My hope is that future generations of domestic workers in Bangladesh will inherit a stronger movement, greater opportunities, and a future where dignity, rights, and decent work are not aspirations, but realities.

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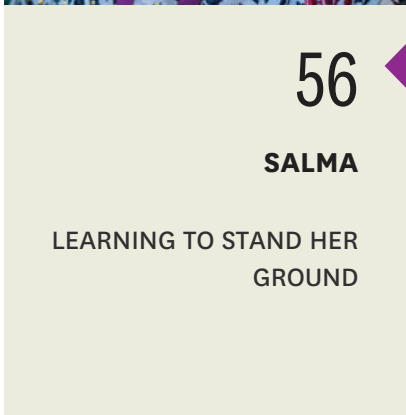
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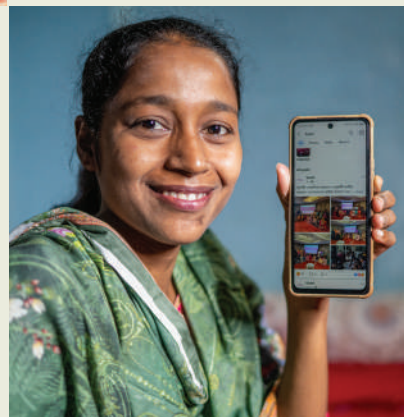
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SHARMIN

From Making a Living to Making a Difference

When Sharmin Akter started working after her marriage in 2012, earning an income was not a choice so much as a condition of making a life in Dhaka. Living in a slum came with costs the couple could not escape. Her husband worked as a kaarchupi worker — a form of decorative needlework that required hours of intense concentration. This could bring home an income, but it was physically too demanding — straining his eyes and causing frequent headaches. He was unable to earn enough to keep the household going. Sharmin had to begin earning, so she started working as a domestic worker. But the jobs available close to home did not pay enough. To earn a better wage, she had to go farther. Her husband was unhappy about the arrangement, but the family needed the income.

Especially the birth of their first child made the pressure more visible. “We managed to endure the hard days somehow, but we couldn’t accept that kind of life for our son”. Sharmin realised that simply getting by would not be enough if they wanted to give their son a better life. She began working alongside her husband in decorative needlework so that together they could increase the overall household income.





Sharmin with her employer; after completing cooking training, she secured better-paid work — earning nearly 50%.



Sharmin is also a trained elderly caregiver after completing a three-month caregiving course.



Only when her first child started school, after the Covid-19 pandemic, Sharmin became a mother for the second time. With two young children at home, the farther distance domestic work was no longer feasible. Although her husband was a responsible father, he also needed to work throughout the day to earn enough for the family. Someone had to remain close to the children. Sharmin had to replace her work with the one that was available nearby. It was a cleaning job in a flat close to home. But the pay was low. Her responsibilities were also limited as she was allowed to clean but not to cook. The arrangement solved the distance problem, but her income remained insufficient.

In 2024, her entry into the Suniti project began to change that equation.



Throughout the project, she first completed a four-day basic orientation, followed by a ten-day technical training programme with UCEP. She learned different methods of cooking, including 19 types of dishes and cooking techniques as well as improved and more hygienic approaches to household cleaning. The training helped turn experience gained informally over the years of her domestic labour into marketable skills.

Domestic workers often enter households because they know how to perform care and household work, but the skills involved are rarely treated as professional competencies. Suniti's approach sought to change that by combining occupational skills with life-skills development, rights awareness and collective organising. It is found that 95 percent of participating domestic workers had received vocational or life-skills training by the end of the intervention, while 83 percent rated the quality of the training as high or excellent.



For Sharmin, the training soon started taking her into better earning opportunities. In another household, she was able to take on work for fewer hours while earning significantly more - her salary increased by almost 50 percent after her cooking training.

Suniti had also introduced her to another possibility. As well as technical skills, she learned practical tips for small business: how to think about preparing, presenting and selling food on the roadside. Cooking, which had long been part of her unpaid and paid domestic responsibilities, became something she could also turn into an economic opportunity on her own terms. She began attending fairs where she sold homemade food from stalls, supplementing her income with small-scale food sales.

She never stopped at only earning more. She joined the Mirpur zone domestic worker forum and, within a relatively short time, became its vice president. "I could never speak for myself before- let alone for others", Sharmin says. This leadership role in a local capacity gave a new direction to skills that she had already been developing in another form: speaking up, negotiating, helping others and taking responsibility. The forum became a place where domestic workers could discuss wages, working hours, difficult employers, contracts, safety and other workplace concerns. Across the project, these worker groups increasingly developed from spaces for sharing information into spaces for collective problem-solving and advocacy.

Her ambitions continued to grow. In 2026, Sharmin completed a three-month Elderly

Caregiving Training under the project. She now earns additional income by providing care to an elderly person at BIHS Hospital. She no longer lives in a slum. Today, she lives with her husband and two children four-year-old Samira and Sifat, who is in eighth grade in a small flat they rent. There is even a separate room where she and her husband continue their needlework.

She did not want to be the worker who had learned how to move forward to better conditions while the domestic workers around her continued to face the same vulnerabilities. She began encouraging other domestic workers to know their rights, to insist on written contracts and to think carefully about the conditions under which they accepted employment. When someone joined a household for work from her area, Sharmin made sure she understood what she was entitled

to and to avoid experiencing the hardships that so many domestic workers had previously accepted as simply part of the job. Now, she wants every domestic worker to know their rights and entitlements, which require further support from the government, communities, development partners and relevant actors.

Perhaps the most significant change is in what Sharmin now imagines for other workers. She wants domestic workers to have stronger collective representation. She wants them to be able to organise, negotiate and protect themselves rather than facing employers individually. Her aspiration is for a trade union — a structure through which domestic workers can have a stronger collective voice and greater bargaining power.



SUMAIYA

How a Certified Caregiver Rewrote Her Value

On the fringes of western Dhaka, where the informal settlements of Ghatarchar meet the concrete towers of Bosila, domestic care is usually seen as a private arrangement between a woman and her employer.

For Sumaiya, who had completed schooling up to tenth grade before early marriage halted her education, entering the care economy was a matter of basic family survival. Yet her experience exposes the complex friction at the centre of development interventions: while institutional programmes seek to elevate care into a recognised profession, the steepest obstacles often lie not inside an employer's apartment, but right across the worker's own front door.

Sumaiya joined the Suniti project in 2019, an initiative supported by Oxfam and implemented alongside partners like UCEP Bangladesh to build structured pathways out of informal domestic work. Over five years, she completed an extensive training trajectory, advancing through nineteen days of vocational instruction, practical modules, and clinical attachments. Her





...who had completed schooling up to tenth grade before early marriage halted her education, entering the care economy was a matter of basic family survival...



The training transformed Sumaiya from an unregulated domestic helper into a certified caregiver.

credentials far exceed the informal standard of Dhaka's domestic market as she secured a formal National Skills Development Authority (NSDA) certificate and completed a month-long institutional caregiving placement at BIRDEM Hospital.

The training transformed her from an unregulated domestic helper into a certified caregiver. Sumaiya took over complex patient care in private residences where she administers medication schedules, checks blood glucose levels, monitors vital signs, and manages the hygiene of bedridden elderly patients.

With professional credentials, she could now find the market leverage point with ease. Sumaiya stopped accepting vague, open-ended arrangements. "Before, employers would dismiss us with vague promises to pay whatever they liked later," she explains. "Now, they ask what my rate is. If they offer BDT 1,200 for a shift and it falls below my value, I tell them respectfully: 'It will not work for me at that rate'. I leave my phone number. If they agree to BDT 1,300, they call back, and I settle our festival bonuses before the work begins".

Yet her upward economic trajectory triggered immediate domestic resistance. Development frameworks frequently assume that women possess full autonomy over their time, ignoring the deep patriarchal surveillance within low-income neighbourhoods. Sumaiya's husband, an informal tailor, viewed her participation with suspicion. Neighbours gossiped when male field mobilisers visited to coordinate training that prompted verbal abuse at home.

To attend classes, Sumaiya bore an exhausting double burden. Every domestic task including cooking, cleaning, and childcare had to be completed before dawn, so her husband found no pretext to object.

The crisis escalated after an International Women's Day rally in central Dhaka ran late, stranding participants in city traffic until midnight. When she returned to Bosila, she was met with severe domestic violence, requiring project caseworkers to intervene directly and mediate with her family.

"Our biggest challenge is inside our own rooms," Sumaiya reflects. "Through this training, we learned to speak with educated people and demand our worth. But our husbands' mentality did not change with our certificates. I told the organisers: you cannot train us in isolation; you must work with our husbands too".

Sumaiya's dilemma illustrates the critical policy gap facing informal labour reforms. While the 2015 Domestic Workers Policy laid the groundwork for dignity, and the historic Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2026 has





finally recognised domestic staff as “workers,” legal reform remains heavily fixated on the traditional workplace.

The upcoming Bangladesh Labour Rules, 2026 must bridge this divide. For residential care workers, protection cannot stop at factory gates; the Rules need gender-responsive safeguarding, community-level dispute resolution, and formal model contracts that recognise specialised home-based nursing as dignified work.

Between morning patient visits and running her household, Sumaiya still operates a sewing machine bought through a micro-loan, helping her husband finish garments. Her goal is to save enough from professional caregiving to open a commercial tailoring shop for him, neutralising domestic tension while she pursues institutional hospital contracts.

“The policies and the training have given us a ground that cannot be taken away,” Sumaiya continues, “The Suniti project has built a solid foundation for us. But large numbers of people like me are in the position where I was. Therefore continued and increased interventions would be great for wider impact”.



PARUL

Reclaiming the Contract with Defiance and Dignity

In the low-lying settlements of urban Dhaka, domestic labour is rarely treated as an economic transaction; it is accepted as the social fallout of rural displacement. Parul Begum's life traces that precise systemic path. When the Meghna River tore away her family's homestead in Bhola, it swept away their last economic defence.

Absorbed into Mohammadpur's migrant sprawl after her mother died and her father remarried, eight-year-old Parul was placed into the capital's most unregulated institution: the *bandha bua* system, an arrangement of round-the-clock live-in servitude.

By age twelve, the predatory nature of that isolation became overt. When her employer's son began sexually harassing her, her relatives responded with the survival calculus of an underclass: she was married off to an adult rickshaw puller to avert social scandal.

A decade of marital abuse followed. When her husband abandoned her in 2010, Parul made a break from systemic fatalism. Destitute and left with four young children, she formally initiated and secured a divorce.





The turning point came in 2019, when she joined the Suniti initiative, led by Oxfam with support from Global Affairs Canada...





Her early independence exposed the raw mechanics subsidising Dhaka's middle-class households. Working twelve-hour days across multiple homes, Parul earned a flat Tk 100 a month, a wage that barely paid for a tin-shed room.

She and her eldest son survived on leftover food handed down from the employer's kitchen, while she paid Tk 10 daily to an NGO facility to warehouse her toddler during her shifts. Her existence was underwritten entirely by her own uncompensated physical exhaustion.

The baseline arrangement persisted because the state long treated the private threshold as a legal black box. While the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy 2015 formally acknowledged domestic labour, its lack of statutory backing left millions of women dependent on the goodwill of homeowners. Wage deductions, sudden firings, and uncompensated overtime remained the norm.

Parul's turning point came in 2019, when she joined the Suniti initiative. The intervention combined rights awareness with institutionalised technical upskilling through a vocational curriculum.

At the training centre, the curriculum attacked both physical drudgery and structural subservience. Parul learned to operate modern appliances that include microwaves, induction cookers, and washing machines. This removed the perpetual threat of wage garnishment over accidental equipment damage. She completed modules in specialised multi-course catering, earned a formal institutional certificate, and



adopted ergonomic standing mops to abandon the degrading ritual of scrubbing floors on bare knees.

The vocational credential transformed her occupational standing. Parul, now equipped with market literacy, she ceased accepting arbitrary compensation. She negotiated fixed hours and higher rates, and her monthly income stood steady between Tk 12,000 and Tk 13,000 across three private residences. Yet individual bargaining power inevitably collides with legal limits. The passage of the Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2026 marked a historic milestone by formally recognising domestic workers as “workers” under national labour statutes, securing rights to unionise, claim employment injury compensation, and access dispute resolution bodies. Still, the amendment leaves foundational guarantees outside its direct



text which involve statutory minimum wages, fixed working hours, weekly rest, and maternity protection.

The burden of making that legal recognition tangible now rests on the drafting of the Bangladesh Labour Rules, 2026. For day-workers like Parul who balance multiple employers, conventional factory inspections are unworkable inside residential apartments. Instead, the upcoming Rules must establish digital worker-employer registries and enforce simplified, standard written contracts that clearly state duties, hours, and wage baselines. They require accessible Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms to settle domestic labour grievances without prolonged legal

proceedings, alongside confidential, gender-responsive reporting systems to tackle workplace harassment.

And Parul stays ever vocal regarding the issue. Whether addressing public rallies at the Central Shaheed Minar or organising neighbourhood protests at Baishakhi field after a fellow worker was assaulted near Geneva Camp, she refuses to remain an invisible cog in the urban economy.

“Skills give you options, but the defiance has to come from within,” Parul says. “Unless you cultivate the stubbornness to push back against exploitation, no training can rescue you”.





Parul with her family. Parul believes that while skills open doors, real change comes from within — the courage to resist exploitation.

LUCKY

Empowerment of Self, Dreams for the Community

To understand the journey of Mossammat Lucky as a domestic worker who has now become the president of the Khilgaon regional forum in Dhaka and the additional joint secretary of the national forum of domestic workers — formed under the Securing Rights of Women Domestic Workers in Bangladesh or the Suniti project initiated by Oxfam Bangladesh — one must learn about her life so far.

A series of unfortunate events that began in 2020 turned Lucky's life upside down. At the time, she was living with her husband and three children in a small flat in Dhaka's Segunbagicha, that the family owned. They also had a small shop where they sold snacks and other food items. At the very beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the entire country went into lockdown, her husband, who worked at a courier service company, lost his job without receiving the salary that had already been due for months. As they also had to close up their small shop, the family found itself in an unexpected financial crisis. In such a stressful situation, Lucky's husband suffered from a brain stroke. They had to sell their flat and shop to keep their heads above water. To make matters



Lucky dreams of opening her own childcare centre, involving educated domestic workers as tutors.

***Lucky first
sought work
as a domestic
worker at her
neighbour's
home as she
could not venture
outside because
of the lockdown.
That was five
years ago...***





Maintaining a dignified relationship with her employer is important to Lucky.

even worse, Lucky's husband suffered from two more strokes over the years, which left him partially paralysed and with very limited mobility. All of this led Lucky, who had devoted her entire life until then to take care of her children, to make drastic decisions that changed her life as well as how her family functioned as a unit.

Lucky first sought work as a domestic worker at her neighbour's home as she could not venture outside because of the lockdown. That was five years ago. Now she must go out for work every day to support her household as the sole breadwinner. But when she leaves her home to work as a domestic worker at her employer's home, she must look to others for support for taking care of her own children who remain at home. Lucky is a mother of four. Her eldest son (17) has Down Syndrome, her only daughter (13) is studying in school and her youngest is only three and half years old. She sent her third child, another son who is only seven, away to her ancestral home in Patuakhali, where her mother can take care of the child while he continues his primary education. Her husband is unable to look after himself, let alone the children. Most of the time, Lucky leaves her husband at her sister-in-law's home so that his needs can be taken care of properly in her absence. Lucky's children, who are all underaged, have to stay home unsupervised. She accepts the reality of her situation when she observes, "I've to look after my husband who requires round-the-clock care. But I also cannot jeopardise the life of my children by staying home and not having any financial security. I must go out for work to survive."





Her children's safety, therefore, is one of Lucky's biggest concerns. She usually asks her neighbours to look after her children when she is away at work, but she knows it is not a sustainable solution. And this realisation is what has led to her dream to open daycare centres for the children of domestic workers. A dream she passionately believes is achievable, because she has gained valuable knowledge and understanding of structural resources as well as empowerment and confidence in herself and her work as domestic worker since she became associated with the Suniti project. Starting from the life and occupational skill development trainings to the exchange of dialogues with different stakeholders at the level of policy-making, the project has strengthened Lucky's sense of resolve and inspired her to dream bigger for herself and her community. She says, "We, as domestic workers, are vulnerable to unsafe conditions at our workplaces. But what about our children who we leave at home unguarded? Who ensures their safety while we work?"

Lucky's plans for the future are not only limited to opening a childcare centre in her own locality. She wants to expand it further and build a network of support systems for the fellows of her community. She plans to involve domestic workers who have received education to some extent in tutoring the children in early education at the centres with a minimal fee. Lucky believes such a plan would lead to creating an extra source of income for domestic workers while contributing towards the literacy of their children. The Suniti project has empowered her to think bigger and better. What now is needed,

according to her, is access to proper resources and funding to build a sustainable future. She hopes that the domestic workers, empowered by the Suniti project, will be provided with practical opportunities where they will be able to put all their newly gained knowledge and training to use in constructing better lives and futures for the next generation.



SHAHNAJ

A Leader with a Clear Vision

After the completion of the practical attachment part of her elderly care training under Oxfam's Securing Rights of Women Domestic Workers in Bangladesh project at the BIHS General Hospital, Shahnaj Begum joined SAJIDA Foundation as a caregiver. She now works full time as an in-house caregiver. It, however, took Shahnaj nearly two decades to reach such a position, and, according to her, the project's skills development trainings and the specialised elderly care training contributed immensely to this success.

Shahnaj first started working as a domestic worker in 2007. When she was in class 10, she was married off with the promise from her in-laws that they would let her continue her education. But that was a false hope. Shahnaj barely managed to sit for the School Certificate Examination and then all her aspirations towards higher education were dashed. When she gave birth to her eldest daughter, she made a promise to herself: she would do everything it takes to ensure her children's education. Her in-laws believed that education for girls was not important and enrolled their granddaughter in a local school with poor quality. That was the point when Shahnaj decided that she would work so that she could put her daughter in a better





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Shahnaj is the president of the Badda regional forum for domestic workers.



school and pay the tuition fees herself. That was her introduction to domestic work.

Now, with the help of the Suniti project, Shahnaj has become a trained caregiver and reached a leadership position among her fellows as a result of her remarkable perseverance and her determination to make the future better for both herself and her community. She is the president of the Badda regional forum of domestic workers and an elected executive member of the national forum. Although Shahnaj's own journey as a domestic worker has taken a turn for the better, she has not forgotten her roots. She certainly has not forgotten her community and where her responsibilities lie.



Shahnaj's regional forum has rented a small room as an office space and she presides over a meeting there every single day. She works a 12-hour shift from 8:00pm–8:00am, returns home and takes care of her own household work and then goes to the forum meeting at 4:00pm. At the forum office, members convene to speak about different issues regarding their work and situations, plan activities and present complaints for resolutions. Shahnaj and her forum deal with different sorts of domestic and workplace related disputes almost every day, and according to her, "We, as a forum, can successfully resolve nine out of 10 problems most of the time. It is possible only because we work as a united front and the local people trust us to make the right decisions. This has become possible because of our achievements from the Suniti trainings."

To give one example, Shahnaj and her forum recently stopped the child marriage of a



15-year-old girl, who studies in class 7. The child's mother went to Saudi Arabia to work as a domestic worker a few months back. Her father suddenly decided that he would take her out of school and fixed her marriage. When women domestic workers of the neighbourhood came to Shahnaj and her forum and requested their intervention, they immediately responded. Shahnaj visited the girl's father and requested him to reconsider, but he said that he made the decision because he did not want to pay his daughter's tuition fees. Then Shahnaj proposed an alternative. What if she spoke to the girl's school and managed to get her school fees waived entirely? This made the father pause and he said he would reconsider in that case. And then Shahnaj spent two days running back and forth between people and advocating for the girl. She even took days off from her regular job to deal with this situation first. The outcome of her hard work was that she managed to get the school to waive the tuition fees and successfully prevented a child marriage. She says, "We just could not let a girl's future get ruined like that. I experienced something similar myself. If I have to miss work for a couple days, so be it. My community, my responsibilities towards my fellows as their leader will always come first for me, even before my responsibilities at home." She participates in events to raise awareness about domestic workers' rights regularly and, along with her community, organises protests and demands justice when one of their fellows is harmed in any way.

Shahnaj says that her personal sense of duty was further strengthened when she visited Nepal to gather experience as part of the project.

She plans to incorporate her learnings in her capacity as a leader in the context of her reality. Shahnaj shares that she is lucky enough to be engaged with the project. There are hundreds and thousands of domestic workers who need similar kinds of support. In addition, awareness and support from the communities are still big issues

She also points out distinct gaps in the current domestic workers policy, such as the absence

of transparent and enforceable frameworks with regard to wages, work hours, mechanisms for dispute resolution, the formation of trade unions and the access to legal resources. Empowered by her training and knowledge, Shahnaj now wants to dedicate her life towards making the just demands of the domestic workers community a reality.



PINKY

Choosing a New Tomorrow

For Pinky Akter (26) finding a source of income has always involved a difficult negotiation between survival and care. Married while still in 9th grade, she has been enduring an abusive relationship. After completing her Secondary School Certificate exam under these difficult circumstances, financial struggles increased. Becoming a mother at the age of 20 left her with little room to pursue the plans she had once made for herself. Eventually, she entered domestic work to earn an income. But then she encountered the new constraint — earning an income meant leaving her months-old daughter behind.

Domestic work in Bangladesh is overwhelmingly performed by women and remains largely informal, undervalued and outside formal labour protections. Working in private households across Dhaka, Pinky had no employment contract or predictable working hours. Hence, managing the demands of domestic work alongside caring for her daughter became increasingly difficult. Her husband, whom she discovered after marriage was struggling with drug abuse, was not someone she could trust with their child. Then she found Shapna aapa, who enrolled her in a training initiative run by Oxfam Bangladesh's Suniti project.





Domestic work in Bangladesh - overwhelmingly performed by women and remains largely informal, undervalued and outside formal labour protections. Working in private households across Dhaka, Pinky had no employment contract, predictable working hours...

After completing life-skills and occupational training, including household appliances, Pinky now works as a cleaner at Bangladesh Shishu Hospital.





Securing Rights project has been designed around precisely these overlapping vulnerabilities, combining livelihood and occupational skills with life-skills development, rights education and collective organising. Through the project, Pinky received life-skill development training as well as occupational training, including the training on household appliances.

Suniti Project has provided a contextually relevant curriculum, while the life-skills component focused on confidence and communication. The project deliberately combined these elements so that women could develop not only occupational competencies, but also the confidence to navigate their working lives differently. Today, Pinky works as a cleaner in the quarters of Bangladesh Shishu (Child) Hospital. She does not earn much. In conventional development narratives, this might appear to be an incomplete outcome: a worker receives training but then chooses a low-paid occupation. But Pinky's story is less about upward mobility than about having some room to make choices within constraint.

One of the important interventions under Suniti was the creation and strengthening of domestic worker groups and forums. These were not merely spaces for receiving information about rights or attending project activities only. Over time, they became places where women could speak about the everyday problems that they have in their working lives and think through possible ways forward together. These spaces increasingly moved from information-sharing towards problem-solving and advocacy, with peer support becoming an important source of

confidence for workers who often faced their difficulties alone.

For Pinky, the weekly meetings of the Mohammadpur zonal forum became particularly important at a moment when she was struggling with a choice that had no easy answer. She needed an income, but her daughter was still very young. Leaving her child for long hours to take up domestic work was becoming increasingly difficult, particularly because she could not rely on her husband to care for her. In the forum, questions like these could be discussed with other women who understood the realities of domestic work firsthand. “I don’t think I could leave my previous job if not for Shapna apa, who helped me find the job at Shishu Hospital within a month after I shared my struggle.” Pinky says. The decision to take the job at Bangladesh Shishu Hospital quarters was not a decision to give up on earning more. It was, in many ways, a decision to buy herself time to prepare herself for the next step. Pinky is already thinking about that next step.

Once her daughter starts school, she plans to look for work in food courts where she hopes to make better use of the skills she has developed. For now, she is choosing work that gives her time to take care of her daughter. Soon, when her daughter is settled into school, she hopes to pursue work that can offer a more stable income and greater opportunity.

Suniti has not transformed her circumstances overnight. What it has given her is a combination of skills, confidence, relationships and spaces for collective problem-solving

resources that allow her to think beyond immediate survival. The project has helped her begin to see livelihood not as a single job she must hold on to at any cost, but as something she can gradually build. The groups with the other fellow domestic workers have helped make individual experiences discussable. These interventions are part of a broader attempt to move domestic workers from being isolated workers negotiating privately with employers

toward becoming workers with skills, networks and a collective voice.

For Pinky, building the livelihood is inseparable from building a future for her daughter. For now, that means being there when she is needed. Soon, it may mean stepping into better work. And in between, she is preparing herself for both.





Once her daughter settles into school, Pinky hopes to find steadier, more promising work — Suniti project is helping her see her livelihood as something to build, not just hold onto.

SALMA

Learning to Stand Her Ground

“When the sisters of Naari Moitree came to survey us, I was opposed to it. My life was such a struggle back then, I didn’t want to get myself involved in anything that would cost me time.” At that point in her life, Salma’s days were already consumed by the demands of getting by.

Salma Akter lives in one of the slums of Mirpur, where home itself comes with a degree of uncertainty. In a densely populated settlement built around closely packed homes and limited space, the possibility of a fire is never entirely distant. Her home has been affected by two fires, and after the most recent one, she could not afford to fully rebuild the small room where she lives with three other members of her family. The room remains only partially rebuilt, with the signs of what was lost still visible in the space they continue to call home.

For Salma, however, this uncertainty was not new. It began much earlier in her life when she became a mother at just 16. At an age when many young people are only beginning to imagine what adulthood might look like, Salma was already carrying responsibilities of a whole family. Her first experience of paid work was in a garment factory. The working days were long,





It was after this period when the sisters of Naari Moitree came to her community to conduct the survey. Salma knew that she was not looking for training or a worker group...



Facing an imbalance of power at work, Salma decided to gain new technical skills — from appliance use to hygienic cooking. Salma shares her experience at a meeting with fellow domestic workers.

stretching through hours of repetitive labour, yet the money she brought home remained small. Small pay wasn't the only issue; her supervisor repeatedly harassed her, making inappropriate gestures towards her every day.

Eventually, she had to leave the garments factory and shifted to domestic work. It was not necessarily easy, but she thought it offered a way to earn while having some control over where and how she worked. But her employment remained precarious. The Covid-19 pandemic made that instability impossible to ignore. Salma lost two of her domestic work jobs during the pandemic, without explanation and without any protection to fall back on. Employers often held the greater power in deciding wages, working hours and even whether a worker could take a day off. Salma had seen women in her own community being threatened with dismissal for asking for leave, and had even witnessed workers being physically beaten at their workplaces. For domestic workers like her who depended on their wages to keep their families going, refusing an unfair condition was rarely an option.

It was after this period when the sisters of Naari Moitree came to her community to conduct the survey. Salma knew that she was not looking for training or a worker group. She was already struggling to make ends meet. Giving her time to something like that only felt like a luxury she could not afford. But a while later she noticed that other women from the slum were beginning to attend the Suniti activities regularly. Curiosity

eventually overcame her hesitation. She decided to go herself.

The project provided technical training, covering areas such as operating household appliances, using appropriate cleaning materials and techniques, and preparing food from different cuisines while maintaining hygiene and safety standards. Since its launch in 2019, the 'Securing Rights for Domestic Workers in Bangladesh' project, supported by Global

Affairs Canada and implemented by Oxfam in Bangladesh, has sought to bring these concerns into sustained focus. Salma had already spent years working inside other people's homes. She knew how to clean, how to manage household tasks and how to get through a long working day. Yet, she realised knowing how to work and being recognised as someone who possesses skills are not necessarily the same thing. As she recalled one lesson, "We had no idea that something as simple as a bay leaf could cause



a pressure cooker to burst. We learned even these little details during the training.”

With her new skills, she began working in two additional households. She noticed a difference in how employers responded to her. She could operate appliances more confidently, use cleaning products more appropriately and she knew what she was doing. She laughed when reflecting on the difference, amused

that something as seemingly insignificant as knowing how to use an appliance properly could change how people perceived her. In these sectors of informal employment, knowledge can become a form of bargaining power. Salma began using written contracts when entering domestic work. In this way, she could have the terms of employment recorded instead of relying on the verbal promises of the employer.

The change is not just that Salma now knows how to use a pressure cooker, negotiate a wage or ask for a contract. Her own life is still far from secure. The unrepaired roof under which her family lives is an upsetting reminder of that. But she has begun to understand that the insecurity she once accepted as an unavoidable part of domestic work does not have to remain that way.





ZAKIA

The Lawyer She Never Became, the Leader She Did

When Zakia first came to Dhaka, she was only five or six years old. She does not remember exactly how old she was, only that the new place was unfamiliar, crowded and scary. Her family had come looking for a way to survive, so her mother began working as a domestic worker. After her mother gave birth to her little sister, Zakia would often carry her to the house where her mother worked so that her mother could feed her. That's where she watched the daughter of their employer Anupoma, almost the same age as Zakia playing with all the colourful toys, having good food and everything.

Anupoma, Zakia remembers, was the centre of attention in the household. When Zakia had just entered her teenage years, her mother came home one day and told her, "They want to take you." Zakia was too young to understand what that meant. She imagined that she would be going to live like Anupoma, surrounded by the things she had admired from a distance. She would, perhaps, have toys of her own, eat better food and spend her days playing.

That hope did not last long. Once she entered the household, Zakia discovered that she was being brought in to serve Anupoma's childhood,



not to be in it. Her days filled with household chores and caring for Anupoma. She cooked, cleaned and looked after the child while her own childhood slipped away. Like many young domestic workers, she found herself living inside another family's home while remaining outside the protections and opportunities that shaped the lives of the people who lived there. That's when she had heard about an evening school run by university students where domestic workers could attend classes. But her employer initially refused to let her go as if it were an unreasonable request. But Zakia

persisted and eventually got permission to attend the classes.

"I thought that if I became a lawyer someday, I could fight my own battles," she wanted to be a lawyer someday, she mentioned. It was a big dream for a young domestic worker whose education had already been interrupted by poverty. And then she married at just fourteen, so becoming a lawyer slowly turned into a dream she had to leave behind. But the will to understand injustice and have the courage to stand up against it never went away for her.

Zakia discovered that she was being brought in to serve Anupoma's childhood, not to be in it...





That opportunity came into her life through Suniti, to secure the rights of women domestic workers in the year of 2020. The sisters from Karmojibi Nari registered Zakia into the project at a time when she was losing it all. Through worker groups, forums, rights discussions, training and meetings with lawyers and policymakers, she began to understand that the problems she had faced were not hers alone. They were part of a system in which domestic workers remained largely invisible as workers.

Suniti provided her with a space where she could speak about the realities of domestic work and find that other women had experienced the same things. The more she participated, the more comfortable she became speaking in spaces where decisions about domestic workers were being discussed.

For Zakia, it was close to a dream come true. The young girl who once had to bargain with her employer just to attend school was now sitting in meetings with lawyers and policymakers, taking part in conversations about the rights of domestic workers. “I couldn’t become a lawyer,” she says, “but now I get to contribute to the changing of the law.” She sees the 2026 amendment to the Bangladesh Labour Act as one of the most meaningful outcomes of this journey. For the first time, domestic workers were formally recognised as “workers” under the law, giving them statutory protection relating to employment injury compensation, trade union rights and labour dispute resolution. Yet Zakia knows that recognition in law is only the beginning. The amendment does not yet provide domestic workers with the full range of protections they need, including minimum





Suniti gave Zakia the words to name her experience, the confidence to speak up, and the strength to stand with other women.

wages, clearly defined working hours, written contracts, occupational safety and health, maternity protection and comprehensive social protection.

Zakia is now the President of the Domestic Worker National Forum Bangladesh as well as of the Mirpur Zonal Forum. Suniti became a blessing in her journey as it gave her the chance to name what she had lived through, the confidence to speak about it and the collective space to act hand in hand with other women. However, Zakia's increased activities and responsibilities outside the bounds of home led to marital strife. Her husband took the children and left, and Zakia now lives with her mother. But Zakia has continued speaking. She remains determined to ensure that women who work in other people's homes do not have to negotiate for the basic dignity she once had to fight for herself.

The striking turn in Zakia's story is how she once dreamed of becoming a lawyer because she believed that was how she could fight her own battles. Instead, she became one of the women helping make sure that domestic workers no longer have to fight their battles alone.

For Zakia, the project has given a good foundation for over 20,000 domestic workers. But the remaining numbers are huge. She will continue working for the domestic workers, and she urges the continued support from the relevant stakeholders, as huge amplifications are required.



NURNAHAR

When Skills Changed the Bargain

When Nurnahar visits her employer, Rahela Haque, these days, she does not need to be told what needs to be done. Rahela is lying in bed, recovering from a recent surgery, and Nurnahar comes to check if she needs anything. After making sure that Rahela is comfortable, she gets on with her work in the household as she has done for the past five years.

“She takes care of everyone, and especially now, when I am not able to do things myself, I can depend on her with my eyes closed.” Rahela says. After five years in the household, Nurnahar has become more than someone who comes to clean and cook. “She feels like a member of the family to us. I don’t have to worry when she is here.”

Nurnahar’s life as a domestic worker began under difficult circumstances. In 2016, her husband died of a brain stroke, leaving her with two adolescent children and the responsibility of keeping the family afloat. She could hardly take a day or two off without having to go through a difficult conversation with the employer. Her first job was in a household of nine people, where





For years, Nurnahar worked because her family needed an income, but she hardly had an opportunity to negotiate what that work was worth. That began to change in 2019, when she joined the Tulip team under Suniti...



she worked from morning until afternoon and earned only BDT 4,000 a month.

Even for a family living in a slum in the Mirpur area, that amount was barely enough. Yet leaving the job was not easy. The household was close to her home, and that distance allowed Nurnahar to manage her work while also looking after her own family. She could not afford to give up the job, even though she could barely afford to keep it. At home, her children were growing up while Nurnahar worked to keep their future intact. Her daughter, Nasrin, now earns through private tutoring and has completed her degree. She says she could not have come this far without her mother. Her father had always wanted her to be better educated, and after his death, her mother took responsibility for carrying that wish forward. Her son, Abid, is yet to complete his SSC, but he has already started learning to drive so that he can begin earning.

With new skills and a stronger sense of her rights, Nurnahar was able to negotiate a better wage and working environment with her new employer.





For years, Nurnahar worked because her family needed an income, but she hardly had an opportunity to negotiate what that work was worth. That began to change in 2019, when she joined the “Securing Rights of Women Domestic Workers in Bangladesh” project, a seven-year initiative funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by Oxfam in Bangladesh with a group of national and local partners. Through the project, she received training and became part of a wider network of domestic workers where women could learn about their rights, develop new skills and share their experiences.

Suniti worked across several areas at once. Partners such as Karmojibi Nari and DSK helped organise domestic workers into groups and networks, create spaces where they could discuss their experiences and build collective strength, while organisations such as UCEP Bangladesh supported skills development. Other partners contributed to legal and labour-rights advocacy, communication and job-placement opportunities.

For Nurnahar, the combination of skills development and a wider understanding of her rights helped change how she approached employment. When her previous employer later moved to the United States and she had to look for another job, she approached the situation differently from before. She negotiated her wage with the new employer and was able to secure a better working environment. That trust matters to Nurnahar because it represents a change in the kind of relationship she has with her employer.

Her circumstances have not changed the fact that she remains a domestic worker. What



New skills and rights-based training have given Nurnahar the confidence to negotiate her work, not just accept it — a change others around her have noticed.

has changed is the position from which she does that work. The skills she gained have made her more confident in carrying out her responsibilities, while the network and rights-based training have helped her understand that her work is something she can negotiate rather than simply accept.

Today, when Rahela is unable to manage things herself, she trusts Nurnahar to take care of the household. For Nurnahar, that trust is perhaps the clearest sign of how far she has come: from a worker who once struggled to ask

for time off and earned BDT 4,000 a month, to one who has the skills and bargaining power to ask for better terms.

Rahela, Nurnahar’s employer, also noticed the difference. “I was hesitant to let a domestic worker use appliances like the microwave or washing machine before because I was worried that they might not know how to use them properly,” she says. “Now I don’t have that worry anymore. I can trust her to use the appliances and take care of things herself.”

SHARMIN

Eyes Looking Far Ahead

“If someone had told me earlier how my life would change because of Suniti project, I wouldn’t have believed them”, Sharmin’s claim is tinged with a hint of disbelief about how far she has come. Before she became the general secretary of the Khilgaon regional forum of domestic workers, she was merely one among the thousands of domestic workers who form one of the largest informal workforces in Bangladesh. While domestic workers are an ever-present element in the fabric of daily life in this country, the recognition of their labour and rights was not part of any discussion at the policymaking level up until recently. Over the years, conversations about domestic workers increasingly gained ground as more and more stakeholders became part of those conversations.

The Securing Rights for Domestic Workers in Bangladesh project, implemented with support from Global Affairs Canada and Oxfam in Bangladesh, has sustained this particular conversation since its inception in 2019. Under the project, 16,000 domestic workers such as Sharmin have been provided with crucial skills development training to meet the demands of





...the ‘Securing Rights for Domestic Workers in Bangladesh’ project, implemented with support from Global Affairs Canada and Oxfam in Bangladesh...



changing times. Sharmin and the others learned how to operate different electronic appliances, how to use proper cleaning supplies and methods for different purposes and how to cook food from different cuisines and make desserts while ensuring hygiene and safety standards in trainings.

While speaking about her experience since becoming part of the project, Sharmin barely contains her enthusiasm. One of the biggest highlights for her has been the trip she made to Indonesia as part of the project to learn how the care economy operates in practice and to exchange knowledge and experience with Indonesian domestic workers. Sharmin found out from the women domestic workers there that both the husband and the wife work outside and share responsibilities at home equally. She saw that many of them are also involved in small-scale business enterprises to strengthen their financial capacities, for example, homemade food delivery services, scooter rentals, etc. She also got the opportunity to observe caregivers at work firsthand. She says, “I realised that our struggles were essentially the same. But they’ve changed their lives with the help of specialised trainings and other opportunities. I realised we can also do the same with proper resources.”

Once just one among Bangladesh’s many domestic workers, Sharmin now leads as general secretary of the Khilgaon forum — a change she still finds hard to believe.





When Suniti implemented an elderly care training programme for domestic workers, Sharmin became one of the 100 trainees. Through the programme, they learned how to take care of elderly people who require special assistance: they learned how to groom them, how to monitor their vital signs using the right diagnostic tools and how to help them in emergency situations. This along with the life and occupational skills development trainings have entirely changed Sharmin's perspective about domestic work. She was ashamed of her identity as a domestic worker before; she avoided acknowledging it if she could. Now, however, she has not only become proud of herself and her work, she has also reached a leadership position in the regional forum of domestic workers because of her newfound confidence and strengths.

As a forum leader, Sharmin now helps members of her community with every chance she gets. She raises awareness about the rights of domestic workers and advises her fellows regarding fair wage, wage negotiation, structured working hours and safeguarding at both home and workplaces. She joined an event organised on the International Domestic Workers Day in Rajshahi in 2024, where she spoke to local domestic workers about their rights and different issues centring on their work. Since becoming a leader, Sharmin's concerns and plans no longer revolve around herself only. With the other regional leaders, she now spends her time actively contributing in the development of ideas to build better livelihoods for her forum members and her local community.

Sharmin knows that the forum will need sustainable sources of income to keep its activities running and that they cannot depend on others all the time. This is where she wants to put her new skills and knowledge into practical use. She shares her plans to start a small food delivery business with her forum. Her plan is to deliver healthy and hygienic food to nearby hospitals for patients and their caregivers, and to homes where this extra support is much needed. She believes this will generate an income for the community, which can be used to fulfil their own needs. This income can also work as an emergency fund, for example, if a domestic worker cannot pay their child's school fees or if they become unwell and cannot work. As for herself, Sharmin does not intend to look back, her eyes are set

towards the future. She continues her work as a domestic worker, but now with better pay that came with her developed skills, especially her training in caregiving. Her confidence becomes transparent again as she says with a bright smile, "I never imagined I'd become a model caregiver from an ordinary domestic worker. Look at me now!"





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