Collectivising Domestic Workers through Professionalisation
Exploring the possibilities of the care economy
It is normally considered as an extension of women’s household work
The ways to capitalise the skills of women
Inclusive approach of rights, skills and well-being
Carefully looking at private ‘home’ being the workplace
Is it a tactful tradeunionism?
SEWA Movement in Kerala emerged through seeking ways to address the crisis of women in traditional sectors who lost their jobs and were searching for new livelihoods. Even as they struggled to retain these livelihoods when access to natural resources declined, several of them were also in need of fresh livelihood options.
Organising Workers at Local Levels

Both in origin and destination

Trade Groups of domestic workers

Regular Gatherings
The women exerted pressure to have some supplementary economic activity. There was a sense of uncertainty in entering into a new field of work, the initiators were quite confident about the possibility of women being trained to perform as nursing assistants in hospitals or homes.
The first nursing assistants training started in early 1987 with 25 women.

Both theoretical inputs and practical trainings were given to them through professional nurses.

There were other subjects like the role and space for women in society and in development, how women could organise and the role of SEWA as a women’s and workers
Means of formalising

- Local identification mechanism
- Fixing minimum wages
- Code of Conduct for the Employers
- Means of Social Security
Most of the workers with SEWA have taken to domestic work either because of economic problems in the family, alcohol addicted partners, the loss of the husband due to death or separation, so that earning an income is indispensable.
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.

Meeting with husbands
Gradually things began to change when women brought home their wages, and also gained in confidence with the input sessions that they received.

Women were simply granted better status in the home with economic independence.

Men continued to assert their dominance, some by demanding the money from their wives, others with their drinking and violence, while some borrowed money and made the wives repay their debts.
Constraints and Challenges

- Pressure from the employer to keep away from the organisation
- Offering gifts and loans in kind
- Only three months in a house continuously
- Local women’s groups which are the basic units of the collective
- Committee representatives are selected from these groups
Organisation of the work

- Local groups (Vanitha Vedi’s) meet once in a month
- Fixed timings
- Full time live-in, full day, part time
- For live-in paid weekly offs and proper rest
- Full day one day paid off
- Skill trainings according to the choice and women
- The service started with nursing assistants with child care, care for the sick and old and post natal services
- then extended to cooking, cleaning etc
- Women managing committee managing the system
- They appoint the staff to run the collective
- The clients have to contact office and the women is linked through the office
- They have a work card for each house to be signed at the end of the day with proper timings
The office used to collect the salary and disburse to the workers

The taxing system has hit the women workers with huge amount of service tax and now GST being imposed for the wage of these workers
- Supervision of work by members’ representatives
- Uniform for all the workers
- Good relationship with the service takers
- Division of jobs and time restrictions
Process of unionisation

- All the members of the collective are members of SEWA–Union
- Developing confidence into workers
- Right based thinking
- Collective bargaining process
- Demand for minimum wages and welfare boards