

When women act together

Penn Thozhilalar Sangam forced government to recognise domestic workers and is still fighting for the dignity of women workers

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Penn Thozhilalar Sangam, a women workers' union who has been successfully organizing women workers, also played a significant role to form an independent association of garment workers named, Garment and Fashion Workers' Union (GAFWU). It is their joint campaigning that made the Tamil Nadu government announce a minimum wage for women garment workers in 2014.

PTS started organizing women workers in the unorganized sector from 1998 and not just helped women to gain bargaining power but also offered new scope of struggle for the common mass of women and new ideological perspective to women liberation.

"In the unorganized sector women are paid a meager sum and mostly they work without any formal contract" says R. Sumathi, general secretary of Penn Thozhilalar Sangam. She has been with the union since the year 2006 and became general secretary in 2017.

"Previously our work was limited in helping women getting pensions, filling bank forms but then eventually we realised these approaches were not enough to bring any change to either the working condition of women or making them enable to speak for themselves", says Sumathi commenting on their earlier campaigning.



Members of Penn Thozhilalar Sangam are having a weekly meeting in their Kelambakkam office on Tuesday

Around the year 2000, they started working among women garment workers for whom overwork, undue wages and sexual harassment in workplaces were major issues. "We used to

visit residential areas when we got a contact and those women workers who were enraged about the continuous exploitation they faced, built the union and helped anchor our agendas and work,” says R. Sumathi.

From the year 2001, PTS became part of New Trade Union Initiatives (NTUI), a cohort of independent trade unions from both the organized and unorganized sector. According to Sujatha, another senior leader who was with PTS from the beginning, NTUI helped them to shape their work and understanding about the role women play in reproductive labour and in what terms PTS will be able to organize these vast numbers of women in the unorganised sector.

“NTUI was able to put women's work at the center. They departed from the mainstream trade union and shifted the focus on care work,” says Sujatha. “NTUI actually started the conversation about minimum and living wage for women and later in 2003 we also campaigned for a living wage for women workers”, she adds.

The union got its registration in May 2001. They have their various units in north Chennai's Perubakkaam, Ambattur, Kelambakkam, Chrompet, OMR. She mentioned how it was difficult to hold meetings with women and maintain a regularity as women hardly can get any spare time. “So, our women members used to visit the areas after work and tried to build trust among workers and their families”, says Sumathi. According to her the fight of women workers was just not about payment it also entailed dignity.

PTS started organizing domestic workers from 2003 in Chennai. They started their work in Perubakkam focusing on creating a unit in each block where it was possible to get women organizers. The women workers started conducting meetings in Chemmanchery, Kannagi Nagar where the members tried to educate women about their right to bonus, weekly day-offs, and common abuses they face in households.

Sumathi said that PTS was the first union to demand a Domestic Workers' Welfare Board which was formally established in 2007. “Within the year 2009, around sixty four thousand domestic workers enlisted with the welfare board. In 2018, Tamil Nadu government also passed Minimum Wage Notification for Domestic Workers largely because of our campaign”, she mentioned. This order stipulated directions on minimum wage, working hours, leave increment, bonus for domestic workers. She added that workers were largely unsatisfied as the wage was kept at forty rupees per hour which was unacceptably low.

“No household was following the orders, so in Perubakkam our members created a common wage card for each woman to keep a record”, says Sumathi.

PTS has around thirty six thousand domestic workers and now they have twenty five leaders, mostly from Dalit communities in Chennai, Kanchipuram, Chengalpattu. “It is not just about getting more members, we try to be there at every cause in the localities,” she mentions. In Kallukutai, close to Madras IIT, in a large settlement area, workers were receiving government facilities. After a massive flood and water logging members from PTS went there, organized protests and their demand for clean water and electricity was fulfilled. “Through these small steps women also understand the importance of being organized”, says Sumathi.

