The Invisible Workforce: Domestic Workers in Odisha and the Welfare Schemes They Cannot Access

She arrives before the household wakes. She sweeps, swabs, washes dishes, does laundry, sometimes cooks and sometimes minds the children. She leaves after the afternoon vessels are done, sometimes before dark, sometimes after. She will do this in two or three homes each day. She....

JABASU KNOWLEDGE COMMONS · JABASU.ORG

A convergence-notes Social Justice & Tribal Welfare

Published: June 2026 · Last reviewed: June 2026

She is a domestic worker. In Bhubaneswar alone, estimates from the Odisha Unorganised Workers' Social Security Board (OUWSSB) and civil society surveys suggest there are somewhere between 50,000 and 80,000 domestic workers — and this is understood to be a significant undercount because the majority of workers in this category have never registered with any government body, and no comprehensive household survey of the Bhubaneswar urban agglomeration has been conducted in this specific sector since the 2011 census.

Domestic workers are India's largest category of informal workers after agriculture. They are overwhelmingly women. They are disproportionately from SC, ST, and OBC communities. They are predominantly migrants from Odisha's interior districts — Gajapati, Kandhamal, Koraput, Bolangir, Rayagada — who have come to cities seeking stable income that their villages cannot provide. And they sit in a peculiar legal void: theoretically covered by several national and state welfare frameworks, practically excluded from most of them.

This Convergence Note examines who domestic workers in Odisha are, what the scheme and legal landscape looks like, where the implementation gaps are, and what NGOs and CSR programmes can do that actually matters.

Who Are Domestic Workers in Odisha?

The 2011 census recorded Odisha's total working population at 1.75 crore, of which approximately 92 percent were in the unorganised sector. The OUWSSB, constituted under the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act 2008, began registration of domestic workers in its first phase of operation, alongside street vendors, rickshaw pullers, agricultural workers, and others. As of 2023, approximately 3.65 lakh workers had been registered across 10 initial categories under the OUWSSB — a number that represents a small fraction of the actual unorganised workforce.

In August 2023, the then Odisha government under Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik announced the expansion of OUWSSB coverage to 50 additional categories of unorganised workers, doubling the registered death and accident assistance amounts (from Rs 1 lakh to Rs 2 lakh for natural death, from Rs 2 lakh to Rs 4 lakh for accidental death). This expansion was significant in intent. Implementation — the actual registration of domestic workers in these new categories — has been slower.

The profile of domestic workers in Odisha's urban centres breaks into three broad groups:

Full-time domestic workers (live-out). These workers spend their entire working day with one employer household. They typically handle cooking, cleaning, childcare, and elder care. They earn between Rs 4,000 and Rs 10,000 per month depending on city, household type, and task range. Bhubaneswar's newer residential areas — Patia, Chandrasekharpur, Nayapalli — have a higher concentration of upper-income households with full-time domestic employment demand.

Part-time workers (maid service model). These are the most numerous. A worker visits two to four households per morning, doing dishes and sweeping in each. She

earns Rs 500–800 per household per month — so total monthly income ranges from Rs 1,500 to Rs 4,000. These workers are the most economically fragile. They lose income household by household when they are sick, during festivals when employers travel, or when employers decide to "try someone else."

Live-in workers. A smaller category, more common in households with infants, elderly members requiring full-time care, or in smaller cities where the employer requires round-the-clock presence. Live-in work often obliterates the boundary between employment and servitude — working hours are undefined, days off are irregular, and the worker's personal time is effectively non-existent. Live-in workers are the most difficult to reach with welfare outreach because they are physically embedded in private households.

Within all these categories, migrant domestic workers face compounding vulnerability: they lack local community networks, they may not speak Odia fluently (workers from tribal districts often speak Gondi, Kui, or Halbi as their first language), they are unfamiliar with their rights, and they are dependent on the employer household not just for income but often for accommodation as well.

The Legal Landscape: Rights That Exist on Paper

The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008

This is the foundational national legislation that covers domestic workers. Section 2(l) defines the "unorganised sector" and Section 2(m) defines "unorganised worker" to include home-based workers, self-employed workers, and wage workers in enterprises employing fewer than ten workers. Domestic workers fall squarely within this definition.

The Act mandates state governments to constitute Unorganised Workers' Social Security Boards, which Odisha has done through the OUWSSB. It also mandates welfare schemes covering life and disability cover, health and maternity benefits, old

age protection, and other benefits. The actual schemes notified under this framework include Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension, National Family Benefit Scheme, Janani Suraksha Yojana, and Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana — all of which are centrally sponsored and exist independently of domestic worker identity.

The catch is registration. A domestic worker must register with the OUWSSB to access most state-level benefits. Registration requires: an identity document (Aadhaar, voter card, or passport), a photograph, a certificate from a "competent authority" confirming unorganised worker status, and now, in many cases, linkage to the E-Shram portal (the national database for unorganised workers launched in 2021). The requirement for a competent authority certificate — which is typically the District Labour Officer, Block Labour Officer, or even a gram pradhan — creates an immediate access barrier for a migrant domestic worker in a city where she knows no officials and has no community organisation to help her navigate the process.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act)

This Act covers domestic workers — a landmark inclusion when it was passed. An employer of a domestic worker is an "employer" under the Act, and the employer's home is the "workplace." If a domestic worker experiences sexual harassment, she can file a complaint with the Local Committee (now renamed District-Level POSH Committee) constituted by the District Collector.

In practice, this protection is almost entirely theoretical for domestic workers. Most workers do not know the POSH Act exists. Most District POSH committees have minimal outreach to informal workers. And the power asymmetry between a domestic worker and the employer household — particularly when the worker is a live-in migrant with no alternative housing — makes formal complaint effectively inaccessible in most situations.

The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016

This is frequently relevant in the domestic worker context because domestic child labour — children below 14 working as domestic helpers, and children 14–18 in hazardous conditions — is prohibited. Enforcement is weak. The private household as workplace is practically invisible to inspection systems designed for factories and establishments.

What Does Not Exist: The Absence of a National Domestic Workers Act

India does not have a dedicated domestic workers protection law. Multiple bills have been introduced in Parliament over three decades, and none have passed. The National Policy on Domestic Workers (2011) was adopted but was never given legislative backing. The International Labour Organization's Convention 189 on Domestic Workers (2011), which mandates written contracts, regular working hours, and social protection equivalent to other workers, has not been ratified by India.

This legal gap is fundamental. Domestic workers are not covered by the Minimum Wages Act in most states (though some have notified specific wages for domestic workers — Odisha has done this in principle through the OUWSSB framework but enforcement is absent), not covered by the Maternity Benefit Act, not covered by ESIC for health and accident benefits, and not covered by EPF for retirement savings.

E-Shram: The National Database and Its Limitations

The E-Shram portal, launched by the Ministry of Labour and Employment in August 2021, was designed as a universal identification system for unorganised workers. Over 30 crore workers have registered nationally. The E-Shram card functions as an identity document and is linked to Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY) for Rs 2 lakh accident insurance.

For domestic workers, E-Shram registration has been more successful than OUWSSB registration simply because the process is more accessible — it can be done at a Common Service Centre (CSC) with an Aadhaar card and a mobile number, without requiring a competent authority certificate. The challenge is that E-Shram provides accident insurance and is a necessary step toward other benefits, but is not itself a benefits delivery platform. The integration between E-Shram registration and state-level welfare schemes remains incomplete.

For NGOs working with domestic workers, E-Shram registration is a practical first step — it gives the worker a document that signals formal recognition, and it creates a data trail that can support OUWSSB registration as the next step.

Mission Shakti and the SHG Pathway

Odisha's Mission Shakti programme, which has mobilised over one crore women into Self-Help Groups across the state, is theoretically accessible to urban domestic workers. Mission Shakti SHGs have been primarily rural in orientation, but the programme has urban components, and Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation and other urban local bodies have facilitated urban SHG formation in some slum settlements.

For domestic workers who live in defined settlements, an SHG provides: a savings and credit mechanism (breaking dependence on moneylenders), a peer network, access to livelihood linkage programmes, and a collective voice that an individual worker does not have. SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) has documented extensively that domestic workers who are in collectives — whether SHGs, trade unions, or cooperatives — have better wages, more regular working conditions, and better access to welfare schemes than those who negotiate individually.

Odisha does not yet have a state-level domestic workers union or collective of the scale of SEWA's in Gujarat, but there are smaller organisations — including Aaina in Ganjam district, which has worked on domestic worker issues in partnership with ILO

and SEWA — that represent viable partnership opportunities for NGOs entering this space.

Healthcare Access: The Hidden Crisis

Domestic workers have among the lowest rates of healthcare utilisation in urban Odisha. The reasons compound:

No paid sick leave means no incentive to seek care. A domestic worker who takes a day off to visit a government hospital loses that day's wages — sometimes from multiple households if the absence crosses into the next day. The rational calculation is to work through illness as long as physically possible.

Government hospital navigation requires time. The OPD queues at SCB Medical College in Cuttack, AIIMS Bhubaneswar, or district hospitals require several hours. A domestic worker who leaves home at 5:30 AM and returns at 3:00 PM cannot fit a government hospital visit into her working day without losing income.

Ayushman Bharat (PMJAY) eligibility is inconsistent. PMJAY covers households in the SECC 2011 database — the socioeconomic census conducted before the scheme's launch. Many migrant domestic workers' household names appear in their village of origin, not in their urban residence, and claims at urban hospitals using a village-assigned Ayushman card frequently encounter administrative difficulties.

Reproductive health needs are acute and underserved. Domestic workers have high rates of anaemia (consistent with broader patterns among low-income working women in Odisha), limited access to antenatal care, and significant rates of unsafe abortion, because taking maternity leave — which the law technically allows but employers do not in practice grant — means job loss.

For NGOs working in this space, partnering with Urban Primary Health Centres to bring health services to domestic workers' collection points (the corners and tea stalls where workers wait for buses, or the parks where they congregate between morning shifts) is

more effective than expecting workers to attend a clinic.

Wages and Exploitation: What the Ground Reality Looks Like

A domestic worker in Bhubaneswar's middle-income apartments earns approximately:

- Rs 600–800 per household per month for daily sweeping and mopping
- Rs 1,000–1,500 per month for daily vessels (utensil washing)
- Rs 6,000–10,000 per month for full-time work including cooking

These wages have increased roughly 30–40 percent since 2018 due to urban labour market tightening, but they remain below the minimum wage notified for unskilled workers in Odisha (Rs 352 per day as of 2023), which translates to approximately Rs 8,000+ per month if applied. For domestic workers doing part-time rounds, monthly income is typically Rs 3,000–6,000 — substantially below notified minimum wage.

Employers do not view themselves as violating the Minimum Wages Act because they do not believe domestic work falls within its purview — and in the current enforcement environment, they are correct in practical terms. No domestic employer in Odisha has been prosecuted for minimum wage violation in the domestic work sector.

The power dynamics in individual households vary enormously. Many domestic workers have long-term relationships with employer households that, while never formalised, involve a degree of mutual understanding — festival gifts, loans in emergencies, tolerance of the occasional absence. These informal arrangements provide more stability than the law provides. But they are entirely dependent on the individual employer's goodwill and can disappear overnight with a change of household or a new employer's more transactional approach.

Verbal abuse and caste-based discrimination are reported frequently by domestic workers' organisations. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013 does not apply to domestic cleaning work in its current

interpretation, but many domestic workers — particularly those from SC communities — report being assigned the most degrading cleaning tasks (toilets, drains) specifically because of their caste identity, which sits on the edge of what the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 is designed to address.

For NGOs: What Effective Programmes Look Like

The most effective NGOs working with domestic workers in Indian cities have converged on a few approaches that are worth understanding for anyone entering this space in Odisha:

Collective formation first. Whether through SHGs, informal associations, or registration as trade unions, collective formation is the prerequisite for almost everything else. Wages can only be negotiated collectively. Welfare scheme access is easier with a community organisor than without one. And legal redress — for wage theft, harassment, or wrongful termination — is only accessible in practice if there is a support system behind the individual worker.

Documentation drives. Aadhaar, ration card, E-Shram registration, OUWSSB registration, voter ID in current residence — many domestic workers are missing one or more of these. A documentation camp that brings together the Block Labour Office, the CSC operator, and a legal aid volunteer is a high-value, low-cost intervention that creates lasting welfare access.

Employer engagement. Some NGOs have experimented with voluntary employer certification programmes — employers who meet basic standards (written appointment letter, one day off per week, notice period before termination) receive recognition and referrals from the NGO's worker database. This is still rare in Odisha and worth piloting.

Adolescent daughters as secondary beneficiaries. Many domestic workers have daughters in the 11–18 age group who are themselves at risk of entering domestic work without completing school, or who are already supplementing family income with

part-time domestic work. SABLA scheme enrollment, vocational training under NIOS, and conditional cash transfer tracking under the state's scholarship programmes are convergence opportunities that serve both the worker and the next generation.

For CSR Managers: Why This Is Investable

Domestic worker programmes are not typical CSR territory. They don't involve infrastructure. They don't produce photogenic school-enrollment numbers. They work with adult women who are employed — which can seem like "not the poorest of the poor" compared to PVTG communities or orphaned children.

But domestic workers represent a specific market failure: these are workers whose labour value subsidises middle- and upper-income household productivity (allowing women in formal employment to work, allowing families to care for elderly members, supporting child development) while the workers themselves carry all the risk of that arrangement. The economic dependency is real and significant. The absence of any redistribution mechanism — no employer contribution to ESIC, no provident fund, no minimum wage enforcement — means that value is extracted without any safety net for the extractor.

CSR investment in domestic worker programmes can be framed as:

- **Labour rights:** Aligning with companies' own supplier and value chain responsibility frameworks, applied to the domestic labour on which their employees depend.
- **Women's economic security:** Domestic workers are women; improving their income stability, health access, and savings behaviour has documented multiplier effects on child nutrition, school retention, and family resilience.
- **Urban poverty:** In any CSR urban poverty programme, domestic workers are one of the most numerous and most underserved target groups.

The metric frameworks should include: number of workers registered (E-Shram, OUWSSB), number of collectives formed, average wage improvement documented,

number of benefit claims processed (accident insurance, health schemes), and number of children of domestic workers supported in education programmes.

Schemes at a Glance

Scheme	Relevance	Nodal Department
OUWSSB Welfare Scheme	Death/accident assistance, welfare benefits	Labour & ESI Department, Odisha
E-Shram Portal	Universal unorganised worker ID, PMSBY accident cover	Ministry of Labour (Central)
PM Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY)	Rs 2 lakh accident insurance (linked to E-Shram)	Finance Ministry / Banks
Ayushman Bharat PMJAY	Health coverage for eligible households	Health & Family Welfare
Mission Shakti (Urban SHGs)	Collective formation, savings, credit	Women & Child Development, Odisha
SABLA	Adolescent daughters' nutrition, life skills	Women & Child Development
POSH Act (Local Committee)	Sexual harassment redress	District Collector
National Family Benefit Scheme	Lump-sum on death of primary earner	Social Security & Empowerment
IGNOAPS	Old-age pension for workers above 60	Social Security & Empowerment

---

The Unfinished Business

Domestic workers in Odisha exist at the intersection of everything the social sector claims to care about: women's rights, labour rights, urban poverty, caste

discrimination, and migrant vulnerability. They are not hard to find — they are in every middle-class apartment building and in every semi-urban household in the state. They are hard to reach because the private household, by design, is invisible to inspection and regulation.

The first step for any NGO or CSR programme entering this space is to acknowledge that invisibility is the problem — not lack of schemes, not lack of budgets. The schemes exist. The budgets exist. What is missing is the organised presence of domestic workers themselves as rights-holders who know their rights and have a collective capable of claiming them.

That organised presence is what NGO work in this space builds. It is not dramatic. It does not make good press releases. But the change it produces — a worker who knows she can call the labour helpline, who has her E-Shram card, who is part of an SHG with a small savings balance, whose daughter is in school — is durable in a way that most social sector interventions are not.

Sources: Odisha Unorganised Workers' Social Security Board official website (ouwssb-labour.odisha.gov.in); Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act 2008; SEWA — Domestic Workers Organise for Their Recognition and Rights (ILO/IDWF, 2022); Odisha Labour Directorate — State Action Plan for Migrant Workers; Down to Earth reporting on OUWSSB expansion (August 2023); POSH Act 2013; ILO Convention 189 on Domestic Workers (2011); E-Shram portal data.

This article is part of the JaBaSu Convergence Notes series. For scheme primers, compliance guides, and sector spotlights, visit jabasu.org/knowledge-commons.

Published by JaBaSu Trust. For corrections or additions: knowledge@jabasu.org