

Shakuntala

Shakuntala is a 70-year-old maid in Delhi, India. Her skin is weathered, her hands rough from years of hard work, but her eyes are bright and sharp. Shakuntala's story is one of hard work in a culture where aging parents are typically cared for by their children, especially sons. She doesn't use a second name since she doesn't want to be identified with any caste.

Despite having three sons, none support her in any way, leaving her to rely on her work to survive. She rises at 5 AM each morning and sets out to work, moving steadily. She travels from house to house, 5 in total— cleaning, cooking, and taking care of the needs of others, all while silently bearing the weight of her struggles.

As long as her husband was alive, Shakuntala was a homemaker. Her husband passed away four years ago, leaving her without financial support. Despite her age, she is determined to continue working as long as possible. It's not a choice for Shakuntala but a necessity.

Household cleaning is typically associated with women, while house construction is typically associated with men. Shakuntala doesn't have any other option. She has had no education, she doesn't even know how to write her name, and household work is the only thing she knows how to do.

"If I don't work (in households), who will feed me?" she said.

Her footsteps are heavy, and her breathing is labored. At each house, she works quietly, washing dishes, scrubbing floors, and dusting furniture. Her movements are practiced and methodical, honed by years of hard work and repetition.

Work provides her with a means of survival and gives her a sense of purpose and dignity. "Work is important for everyone. It gives one a reason to wake up even on this chilly morning and keeps me engaged," she said.

Shakuntala's situation is not unique, as many elderly people in India (especially women) struggle to find support from their families when their husbands die. For many elderly people, work is not just a source of income but also a way to stay active.

"Working empowers women like me, who may have had no opportunities for education or other forms of upward mobility. By working hard and earning a living, I have taken control of my life and shown that I can provide for myself," she said.

Despite the challenges she faces, Shakuntala remains optimistic about the future. She takes each day as it comes and finds joy in life's simple pleasures. "I am grateful for my work and the people who support me," she said.

As the sun sets, Shakuntala finally finishes her last job of the day. She gathers supplies and starts the long journey home, her steps slow and fatigued. But even as she walks, she is already thinking ahead to tomorrow, planning the next steps of her journey and the tasks that await her. For Shakuntala, there is no rest or respite from the demands of her work. But even in the face of this unyielding burden, she remains strong, resilient, and unbreakable.