

Breaking Barriers

Women's identities at work in Delhi NCR

“I may not have a fancy job,
but my work is just as important
as anyone else's.”

SARITA DEVI PAL

Ten Women at Work

Between December 2022 and January 2023, I photographed ten women at work in Delhi and the National Capital Region: a journalist, a surgeon, a make-up artist, a masseuse, the owner of a tutoring centre, a woman who teaches neighbourhood children in her home, two domestic workers, a farm owner, and a woman who milks buffaloes and may not give her first name.

Some of them set their own terms. Some negotiate those terms every day. Some work because there is no other way to eat. Several go home to a second shift that no one counts as work.

Each photograph is paired with her story, and each story ends in her own words.



01

A Name She Kept

EDITOR WORKING FROM HOME

DELHI

7 JANUARY 2023

By night this room is where Areeba Falak eats dinner with her husband. By day it is her office. Today she has left the chair for the rug, working at the small foldable table she keeps for days like this.

Falak, 29, is an editorial program manager at The Times of India. In her early twenties she was one of the youngest TV reporters in the country, after peers warned her that women in media are exploited. She went anyway. Around her she saw women with little control over their lives because they had no money of their own, and decided she would live differently.

Marriage made her wary, until she met a man who shares the chores and the finances equally.

“After marriage, I didn’t change my surname.”



02

The Practical One

DENTAL SURGEON AT WORK

EAST DELHI

23 DECEMBER 2022

Under the lamp, Dr. Sonia Chawla works through magnifying glasses, one gloved hand holding the patient's mouth open, the other steady on the instrument.

She finished her bachelor's in dentistry in 2001 and, after marrying, completed her specialisation in maxillofacial surgery in 2006. She now runs her clinic alongside her husband and publishes research beside her practice. "He is passionate about dentistry, and I am the more practical one," she said.

The practical one handles every money matter herself.

"It's important to be independent and take charge of your finances. It gives you the confidence to pursue your dreams."



03

Two Pairs of Hands

MAKE-UP ARTIST WITH A CLIENT

HAIR AND SHANTI, DELHI
25 DECEMBER 2022

Naina Amatya leans in with a fine brush, drawing the line of a client's eye. Beside her, Aditya, her husband, works at the client's hand. In the mirror the scene repeats itself.

The two co-own Hair and Shanti, a unisex salon, and manage a staff of about twenty. Naina specialises in make-up, Aditya in hair. They greet clients equally and take turns at home so that one of them is always there for their two children. Aditya tells anyone who will listen about her work.

Her favourite line:

"Makeup is not a mask, it's art, and it's an expression of individuality."



04

Allowed

MASSEUSE WITH A CLIENT

KAUSHAMBI, GHAZIABAD

8 JANUARY 2023

Geeta Mishra, 45, sits at the edge of the bed, her hands at work on a client's leg. Her clients ask for her by name. She earns more than anyone in her household, her husband included.

In her upper-caste community, a woman working outside the home is still frowned upon. Geeta works because her husband has “allowed” it, a word that sits beside her success and does not go away. Not everyone approves: one client says she cares more about being the highest earner than about the work. Geeta says she loves her job and keeps improving her technique.

“I want to show other women that they do not have to accept the roles that society has assigned them.”



05

Both Worlds

TUTORING CENTRE OWNER AT HOME

EAST DELHI

20 DECEMBER 2022

The parathas are done. Rajni Wadhwa, 54, sets them on a plate before leaving for Learning Point, the tutoring centre she started at home in 2007 and now runs for more than fifty students. In the evening she will return to this kitchen for her second shift.

She began working in her teens to support her family, stopped when she married, felt uneasy, and started again. With her own savings she sent her son to the United States for a master's degree, without a scholarship. Earning as much as her husband, she says, gives her more say at home.

She holds two views of the work in this photograph:

"Housewives really do nothing. What they do can be done by a maid for 10,000 rupees a month."

"There are some tasks at home that you must do on your own and can't leave to maids. But I manage to balance both worlds and am proud of it."



06

Two to Four

TEACHING NEIGHBOURHOOD CHILDREN

DELHI

28 DECEMBER 2022

Every day from 2 to 4 PM, children walk from the nearby slums to Sabeeha Masood's home. They sit on the carpet with their bags and workbooks while she checks their work, one notebook at a time. Anyone may come; she makes no distinction of caste, class or religion.

For ten years she has prepared children aged six to twelve for entrance exams to the city's schools. Last year about six of them got in. Friends and family donate clothes, stationery and money, and her husband, Hussain, carries the supplies up to their second-floor flat, where there is no lift.

"These small victories make it all worthwhile."



07

Other People's Kitchens

DOMESTIC WORKER

GHAZIPUR, DELHI

26 DECEMBER 2022

Sarita Devi Pal, 30, stands in a kitchen, the ladles and spoons hung on the rail behind her. She works on call across several homes, cooking and organising for other women, then leaves around noon to collect her sons, 10 and 12, from school.

Her husband works nights as a security guard and looks after the boys by day. At home, in a single room with one bed and two chairs, her second shift begins: fresh rotis, folded clothes, a meal shared on the bed. She wants her sons in private schools, with the chances she never had.

"I may not have a fancy job, but my work is just as important as anyone else's."



08

Five Houses

DOMESTIC WORKER

DELHI

27 DECEMBER 2022

Shakuntala is 70. She rises at 5 AM and works in five houses a day, cleaning and cooking. She goes by one name; she does not want to be identified with any caste.

While her husband was alive she kept her own home. He died four years ago. She has three sons, and none of them supports her. She never went to school and cannot write her name. Household work is what she knows, so it is what she does.

She turned to the camera, cloth in hand, and smiled.

"If I don't work [in households], who will feed me?"



09

Accounts Differ

FARM OWNER IN THE FIELD

NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION

4 JANUARY 2023

Kavita Singh walks through her field in the haze, a cabbage in one hand and a sickle in the other.

She was married at 13 and left school. Today she owns a farm and oversees the three women who work on it. Her husband is her business partner, and accounts of that partnership differ. Some who know them say he has the final word and takes credit for her work. One worker says the women are overworked and underpaid; Kavita says they are like family and paid fairly. She says she and her husband decide everything together, and that she trusts him completely.

"I am doing what I have to do."



10

Mrs. Munnu

WOMAN MILKING A BUFFALO
NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION
4 JANUARY 2023

She is 42. Her first name is not given here because she was not allowed to give it. She was not allowed a photograph facing the camera, so this is how she appears: at work, looking away, the milk falling into a steel bucket.

She works about ten hours a day, from sunrise until late, tending the cows and buffaloes and running the household. Her husband says he would never allow a woman of the house to work outside it. Each day a boy named Munna takes the milk around the neighbourhood on his bicycle, sells it at fifty rupees a kilogram, and hands the money to her husband.

"It's not easy. I work all day and night and don't get a break, but that's my fate."

"I do not want to be trapped in this cycle forever."

Ten photographs from *Breaking Barriers*. Delhi and the National Capital Region, December 2022 – January 2023.

The series was edited as a sequence rather than as single frames. Photographs 01 to 03 show women who set their own terms. 04 and 05 show those terms being negotiated. 06 to 08 turn to work done for others, and to work done because there is no other choice. 09 and 10 end with work whose ownership is contested, and then denied. Each story closes in the subject's own words.

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