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# Domestic workers march to demand affordable housing

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**Mumbai:** In an unprecedented show of strength, nearly 5,000 domestic workers and daily-wage labourers defied prohibitory orders on Wednesday to demand that the state government provide affordable housing to the poor. Rallying under the banner of the Ghar Hakk Jagriti Trust, slum dwellers and chawl residents marched from August Kranti Maidan to Azad Maidan, waving black banners and shouting slogans.

The police tried to stop them by clamping prohibitory orders, but the protesters were determined to go ahead. Trust founder Vidya Chavan, a corporator and member of the BMC's improvements committee, led the demonstrators. Residents of the BDD and BIT chawls exchanged notes with slum dwellers who had been promised homes under the SRA scheme.

The long march started from August Kranti Maidan soon after 2 pm and reached Azad Maidan at 4 pm. Addressing the assembly, Chavan said that 92% of Mumbaikars could no longer afford to buy a house within the city given the spiralling costs of real estate.

"The construction cost of an apartment building ranges from Rs 800-1,200 per sq ft. We demand to know why construction firms charge buyers Rs 5,000-50,000 per sq ft," she said. "Why does-

n't the government fix a uniform rate for builders to sell housing space?"

Hinting at a nexus between the powerful builders' lobby and the government, Chavan said that Mumbai's mill lands, Koliwad, gaothans and ULC spaces were being gifted away to private builders at throwaway rates. "These are the lands that are meant to be used for public housing," she said.

Domestic workers and daily-wage labourers from the eastern and western suburbs stayed away from work on Wednesday in order to participate in the march. "We are not likely to lose our wages and we feel public housing is a cause that demands a show of strength," said Janabai Baban Jadhav, a house help who works at Thakur Complex in Kandivli.

Jadhav and her neighbours in Damu Nagar claim to have paid Rs 7,000 each to the government under the slum rehabilitation scheme. "However, since seven years, we have been living in a makeshift structure made of bamboo and tarpaulin," she said, pointing to Chavan's claim that 60% of SRA beneficiaries are not actually allotted homes.

The demonstrators sought to embarrass chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, who celebrated his birthday on Wednesday, by preparing a large greeting card juxtaposing pictures of his palatial official residence with their own rundown chawls.