



## WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS: THEIR ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN INDIA

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### **Abstract**

*Domestic work represents one of the most important employment opportunities for many women in many countries. In India, the demand for care work to be performed by non-household members has increased, especially in urban areas, due to recent growth in the economy and consequent improvement of the livelihood conditions of people in these areas. However, despite the demand for and contribution of domestic workers to the larger economy and the general social good, domestic work is undervalued in the society and poorly regulated. Many domestic workers migrate from rural to urban areas and are vulnerable to labour and other forms of exploitation due to the isolated nature of their work. Many of them are overworked, underpaid and unprotected. There are various reasons for their deprivation but most important is that they are least recognized as they belong to the unseen economy of unorganized sector. This paper tries to put some light on the problems and issues of domestic workers in India*

**Keywords:** *Domestic Workers, Unorganized Sector, Issues.*

### **Introduction**

Women in our society have so far had only a secondary status. It is well known that the economic dependence of women upon men is one of the primary reasons which has pushed them into the background and resulted in their having only a secondary status both within and outside the family (Wadhera,1976). In spite of the fact that the fair sex has proved their mettle in every walk of life, their contribution is not given due credit in most cases. In India women constitute nearly half of the total population and they play a vital role in domestic sphere, in the rural field and also in urban economy. Yet, their economic status is still low as reflected by the census data itself that present a distorted picture of women particularly of those who are engaged in the informal sector of urban economy (Tripathy, 1991).It is found that among all categories in the informal sector, domestic servants' income is the lowest and the problems are many (Sundaram,1966). They are engaged in household tasks, which include washing utensils, floor cleaning, washing of cloths, cooking as well as some outdoor tasks such as purchase of vegetables etc. Most of them live in slums, lead a monotonous life without any colour, struggle every day for their survival and face a numerous problems in their day to day life like long hours of work, insecurity regarding jobs, low status within the house as well as in the outside world (Gathia,1983).

The stigma attached to domestic work has long been ingrained in the mindset of the Indian society. Domestic work is seen as menial and impure occupation traditionally performed by mainly women and children, whose lives are still dominated by a caste system that assigned people his/her place in the society.

They are many a time also subjected to the abuse, might be of their nature of work, lack of rights, poor condition, illiteracy,etc.Violations of the human rights of domestic workers go far beyond the shocking headlines of extreme abuses. They occur every day and around the world in the form of excessive working hours with no rest time and insufficient pay.

### **Unorganized Women Workers in Indian Scenario**

Women in our society have so far had only a secondary status and the economic dependence of women upon men is one of the primary reasons which has pushed them into the background and resulted into their secondary status both within and outside the family (Wadhera 1976).In spite of the fact that the women have proved their mettle in every walk of life, their contribution is not given due credit in most cases. In India women constitute nearly half of the total population and they play a vital role in domestic sphere, in the rural field and also in urban economy. Yet, their economic status is still low as it reflects from the census data, particularly of those who are engaged in the



informal sector of urban economy (Tripathy and Das 1991). As the women in the unorganized sector are considered as invisible, though Unorganized sector always play a vital role in terms of providing employment opportunities to a large segment of the workforce in India. Near about 92% of the total employment in the Indian economy during the period 1999-2000 was accounted for by the unorganized/informal sector (NSSO 55<sup>th</sup> Round 1999-2000). According to an ILO estimate, the value of unpaid household work constitutes 25 to 39 percent of GNP. Women's contribution to the economy by and large remain unorganized Yet, their services are valuable. The great majority of women in India are engaged in home-based work, self-employed, employed in household enterprises, small units, on land as agricultural workers, as laborers on construction sites, as domestic workers, and in most of these categories remains unrecognized and apart from these there are other forms of temporary employment especially in the unorganized sector.

As women in a vulnerable and impoverished sector, they face the additional inequalities of gender. These unequal wages, no maternity benefits, sexual harassment, and poor nutrition and ill-health. Women in the unorganized sector as well as countless other women invariably also do wide variety of "invisible" work, and even sometimes face the dual burden of paid and unpaid labour. The unpaid contribution of many of the activities associated with household maintenance, provisioning and reproduction -- which are typically performed by women or female children -- tends to be ignored in calculations of labour (Joshi 2007).

The life of unorganized sector workers is very tough. Social workers and educationists have been for a long time concerned more with women empowerment and have contributed a great deal in focusing attention of the people to the importance of several factors which should be taken care of in helping women to develop and get empowered. The supremacy and dominance of male is reflected in all the acts in the family therefore women's autonomy is essential to rectify this imbalance and attain gender equality.

### **Long time practice**

Domestic work has a long history in India with both men and women working in others homes as servants. The affluent had servants; mostly men with loyalty obligation and patronage bring the salient aspects of this relationship. Caste defined the hierarchy – lower castes performed the dirty work of cleaning while higher caste men cooked. Though domestic work is not a new phenomenon in India, it cannot simply be viewed as an extension of historical feudal culture where the affluent employed 'servants'. Both in the urban and rural contexts, the nature of work and workers have been rapidly changing. The sector now primarily comprises women domestic workers who are not recognized as workers while their work is undervalued though time has changed, we talk about the development and empowerment of the women but the situation in some cases are still like years back specifically of those women who are engaged in the unorganized sector and in this particularly domestic women workers. Domestic work includes mental, manual and emotional aspects, including care work communities (Anderson 2000). Domestic work is thus viewed as reproductive work that creates not only labour units but also people and social relations. Anderson further draws attention to domestic work being rooted in the community. By the doing of domestic work we literally reproduce our communities and our place within them (ibid: 14). In this context, it is important to note who does the domestic work as this reflects the relation between genders race and class.

The employer-employee relationship is a complex one and is viewed as one of domination, dependence and inequality. Also, this is an area of work where the employer and the employee are mostly females. As a home is the site of work, relations between employer and employee are often not limited to work but spill over as larger support systems this support could be from both the sides but mostly it is from the employee side.

### **Push and pull factors for local domestic workers**

there are various reasons behind the force due to which women especially engaged them in the domestic work. NDWM identified the following socio-economic circumstances as those reasons.



- Poverty is the main reason why many women and children engage in domestic work. In almost all cases, these domestic workers are the product of internal migration in search of employment and for a better life in the city.
- Family problems including rural and male unemployment, disputes at home.
- Ill treatment and loss of parents have resulted in their leaving the house to work as domestics.
- Their debts due to falling crops also drive them to domestic work.
- On the other hand the demand of cheap labor in the growing market economies has cause many women and children to seek employment in the cities and urban areas.  
The urbanization, the break-up of traditional joint family system, and the increased demand for domestic workers from middle-class women who are taking up jobs outside the home also contribute to more poor women and girls migrating from rural villages to cities and urban areas in search of domestic work (CWA News Letter,2004).
- The increasing development and urbanization of certain industries in India have also led to unemployment of workers in certain sectors.
- The adverse repercussions of mechanizations of agriculture led to loss of livelihood by agriculture workers. As a result, women and children migrate for work as domestic to address the economic problems of their family.

### **Problems Faced By Domestic Workers**

The supply of domestic work absorbs the uneducated and unskilled part of the population which has limited job opportunities. Their low education leads to their limited bargaining power, and consequently, low wages, nature of place of work which is usually inside the house of the employer due to which women and child domestic workers faces various physical and sexual harassment by the employer. Apart from these problems there are long lists of issues which has become the part of lives of domestic workers and these general problems are:

- Lack of decent wages and work conditions.
- No uniformity in receiving monetary and non-monetary benefits like holidays etc.
- Violence, abuse and sexual harassment at workplace
- Exploitation by placement agencies: The domestic workers who come through placement agencies suffer exploitation. Many even get caught in cases of trafficking (see section on placement agencies)
- Since they are not recognized as ‘workers’ they do not enjoy access to social security benefits that other workers do, like health insurance, maternity protection and old-age security.
- There is no accountability of employer behavior. The benefits that workers receive are highly dependent on the employer’s benevolence
- There is no contract in place. Hence no limitation in the amount of work to be completed.
- There is gross imbalance of power between worker and employer.

The solution of the problems of domestic workers could be solved through various ways but the most important is the need of a proper law as till now, there is no single law specifically for domestic workers in India and the reason behind it are two major hurdles to legislations, These are:

1. Domestic work is not considered real work; it is just an extension of household services which are not even accounted in the GDP.
2. Lack of availability of accurate data: Governments all over the world find it very difficult to estimate accurately the number of domestic workers. Some part-time domestic workers may not report domestic work as their main occupation, as they would take this work occasionally when work is not available in their villages. “There are varying definitions of domestic work in national statistics. Sometimes, sample surveys conducted miss out on domestic workers intensive inhabitations, which remain concealed in slums”.



### **Living conditions**

Many domestic workers living in large cities also face constant threats of demolitions of their slums and relocation to newer areas on the fringes of the city. This often leaves them both homeless and jobless. Most urban poor live in different types of slum settlements and work in the informal sector. The relocation of the poor to resettlement colonies takes them far away from areas of economic activity in the city, thus making it impossible for them to even earn sustainable livelihood. In this context, it has been well documented that the process of relocation and displacement has led to problems of sustained access to livelihood, education, basic services and healthcare where women suffer the most. Building a house in the resettlement area takes up a large part of the family's income. Even if these workers start work after relocation, living on the margins of the city implies that work will mostly be in areas that are far. Commuting becomes a major issue both in terms of cost and time (Menon-Sen and Bhan 2008). In the resettlement areas (and in the slums), women spend a large part of their time accessing essential services such as water and toilets. The double burden that they face is compounded due to harsh living conditions. This has been documented for other areas of Delhi as well (Jagori 2004). Besides this, they have no access to any form of childcare services. They often leave their own children alone while they go to take care of others' children. In their study on paid care workers, Palriwala and Neetha (2009) note that domestic workers highlight their lack of access to institutional care facilities that provide quality care at affordable rates in their neighborhoods.

### **Wages and working conditions**

Domestic work includes performing the tasks such as house cleaning, laundry, cooking, dish washing, care of children and the aged, and various other activities associated with the regular and smooth functioning of a household.

Many studies have reported that there are no standard norms that decide working conditions for domestic workers. Specified working hours does not exist for many domestic workers. They can work from 8 to 18 hours a day while live in domestic workers are on call 24 hours each day (KalpanaSarma 2003). Some of them not get any rest during the day while others may not be given proper food or living space. Child domestic workers in particular are found to have unspecified hours of work, usually an average of 15 hours each day seven days a week and are on call day and night (SC-UK Supra Note 5) Because they have no fixed hours of work they sleep as late as 2 or 3 am and wake up at 5:30a.m. Live out domestic workers also suffer long working hours in differing households each day from early morning until the evening. (SEWA).

Domestic workers are among the lowest paid workers in India and are paid an amount which is even below the minimum wage of semi-skilled and unskilled workers NDWM( National Domestic Worker Movement)

The fragmentation of the domestic labour market by the area of residence and the class of the employer within one town/city is noticeable. The same broad tasks are elaborated and often performed differently under varied conditions of service. Segmented and niche markets have developed. Thus, for example, the rates paid by expatriates are among the highest. Ethnic stereotypes regarding skill and efficiency also affect the wages and treatment of domestic workers (Surabhi and Mehrotra, 2008). In sum, the wage structure and service packages are complex and variable, making it problematic to arrive at a uniform wage rate for domestic work even for a specific locality (Palriwala and Neetha). This brings difficulty in unionization and legislation and is used as an argument to justify the lack of regulation.

### **Issues of Social Security and Welfare**

Legislation to regulate the working conditions of domestic workers has been on the anvil for some years now in a number of states. However, the political will to enact these laws is missing since employers, who are mainly from the middle and upper classes constitute an important vote bank.

In India, Domestic workers lack healthcare and social security. Their medical benefits are absent and totally depend on their employers. For instance; SEWA survey showed that live-out domestic workers do not have social security. Many domestic workers suffer from health hazards brought by their working conditions. For instance,



SEWA reported that nearly 934 women live-out domestic workers were suffering from back pain but are not getting any medical help from their employer. Some health issues complained by the surveyed 1000 domestic workers include pain in the spinal cord, injury and skin allergies that they tend to neglect (SEWA). Medical insurance covering work related sicknesses are normally absent. Some of these women work as domestic workers over long time periods but have little or no savings for their old age.

In last few decades there has been a tremendous growth in the demand for domestic workers which has led to the trafficking and other forms of exploitation of millions of Women and children of the both sexes and to meet this growing demand there has been a spurt of thousands of placement agencies providing domestic workers in metro-towns of many states who are exploited in various ways as well as trafficked and remain outside the purview of any legislative control.

Absence of any legal protection , has led to severe exploitation women and children which include depriving domestic workers from their entire salary average more than 16-18 hours of work per day, absence of proper food and living/sleeping condition, forced and total cut off from their family members, bounded labour , sexual exploitation by agent during transit, at the office of agency and at the work place in houses of employers, The list of exploitation is endless and frequently reported upon by the media.

### **Aspiration of domestic workers**

The life of domestic workers is so struggling, they face various problems and hurdles in earning their basic needs of life, but they have various aspirations for their future especially for their children as like any other human. Tondon.P(2012) has listed some of the aspirations of domestic workers in her research.

- Education for themselves
- Education for children
- Less commission to agent and more wages to the maid
- Land/property of their own
- Proper sanitation
- A better job: for example work in a beauty parlour
- Engage in skill building activities like stitching etc.
- Food

### **Conclusion**

Women domestic workers belong to the economically disadvantaged group and most of them live in slum areas. There is no uniformity in their wage structure and their wage level is very low. However, they are compelled to do this job because of lower education or poor financial background. They are exploited at their work place and in some cases, even at their own homes. Domestic workers are mainly women, children, migrants, or indigenous people. Their work is undervalued, underpaid, invisible, not recognised, and not respected.

These are the main reasons why in many countries domestic workers are excluded from labour legislation and social protection schemes. Many are denied the right, either in law or in practice, to form or join a trade union. As a result, exploitation, mistreatment, violence, and physical and sexual abuse often go unpunished. Therefore to make them developed and empowered there has to be a specific and proper legislation for the domestic work and domestic worker as it solve various problems in this unorganized sector of work





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