

Working and Living Conditions of Women Domestic Workers in India

Dr.N.Sayira Banu*

Assistant Professor of Economics, Kandaswami Kandar's College, P.Velur,
Namakkal-638182.

Abstract

In recent times there has been a significant increase in the number of women domestic workers in India. The domestic service is now accepted as a significant category of livelihood. The steep decline in agrarian produce and livelihood security in rural areas has caused migration of rural people to urban areas. The number of women domestic workers has been continuously growing in the informal sector of urban India. Domestic work has remained unorganized, unrecognized and unrewarding for the domestic workers. The domestic workers are deprived of minimum wages, healthy work period, safe working conditions and other benefits in the absence of trade unions and state intervention. They experience exploitative situations and multi-faceted abuses. The national and international legal instruments are largely unsuccessful under the existing circumstances.

Introduction:

Domestic work is defined as “work performed in or for a household or households” (ILO Convention 189). Domestic work is therefore defined according to the workplace, which is the private household. Broadly speaking, domestic workers provide personal and household care. Occupations and tasks considered to be domestic work vary across countries they may cook, clean, take care of children, the elderly and the disabled, attend to the garden or pets, or drive the family car. They

may work part-time, full-time or on an hourly basis, and may live in the home of the employer or not.

According to this definition, the ILO estimates there are at least 67 million domestic workers over the age of 15 worldwide, 80% of which are women. About 17 % of domestic workers are migrant workers. Historically and across a diverse range of countries, domestic workers from disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups have tended to provide to provide care services to meet the needs of wealthier households. Consequently domestic workers' contribution to economic growth is considerable, enabling an increase in dual-income families.

Despite their contributions to households and national economies, domestic work is situated at the low end of the care economy, working some of the longest hours, for very low wages. These conditions result in part from exclusion of domestic workers from labour and social rights in many countries, which effectively legitimizes discrimination of a female dominated class of workers. Even when they are covered by the law, domestic workers suffer severe decent work deficits due to high levels of non-compliance, fostered in part by high levels of informality, status in migration and low level of collective organization. Long term care givers in particular work extremely long hours for very low pay. The toll on their health and well-being is clear, but often unrecognized in law and policy. This unequal situation reflects and perpetuates a deep seated social perception that the unpaid care work that women do for their families, has little value to economies and societies.

Driving Forces and Working Conditions

The women domestic workers face the major problems such as – low wages,

extra work, long working hours, lack of holidays, harassment, sexual exploitation, physical torture, ill treatment, lack of welfare facilities, absence of social security measures, lack of rest, development of fatigue, lack of freedom, low level of job skills, absence of bargaining power, work-life imbalance, poor working conditions, migration, social invisibility, economic backwardness, forced labour, discrimination, inadequate legal protection, physical exertion, ill health, malnutrition of being carried on for use, not for profit, and the settlement of wages remains an individual bargain between employer and employed (Caplow, 1954:03).¹

In many countries they are completely excluded from labour law and social security protection, or inferior standards apply. Even where protective laws are on the statute books, they are frequently ignored by employers and not enforced by authorities.

Low wages

The low levels of remuneration among domestic workers is the result of a range of factors, including a large labour supply, undervaluation of domestic work and its contribution to society, the low bargaining power of domestic workers, the lack of representation in the sector, and frequent exclusion from labour protection, particularly minimum wage coverage – all of which tend to be interlinked. Establishing a minimum wage for these workers is a key means to ensure their right to decent work and a decent life.

Undervaluation

Despite the clear contributions of the sector, domestic work is frequently not perceived as real work, performed within an employment relationship. Employers and

¹ Chandramouli, Kodandarama, *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Exploring Engineering (IJITEE)*, ISSN: 2278-3075, Volume-8 Issue-1, November 2018.

societies often perceive domestic work as a natural part of any woman's work, and not as a valuable service provided to their households, performing concrete tasks such as cleaning, cooking, shopping, laundry, as well as caring for children, older people, disabled and other household members in need of care. Such attitudes and perceptions tend to result in domestic work being undervalued in comparison with jobs predominately performed by men.²

Living Conditions

Women domestic workers do not have good socio-economic condition. They face problems both at home and at work place. They migrate from the rural areas to urban areas in search of employment opportunities. They have a heavy workload with less recognition and remuneration. They work hard for a better future (Hazarika et. al, 2002:11). They spend a large part of their time accessing essential services such as water and toilets. They do not have access to institutional care facilities that provide quality care at affordable rates in their neighborhoods (Jagori, 2004:14).

Domestic workers live and work in appalling conditions and are vulnerable to abuse. Their self-esteem suffers considerable damage after prolonged periods of maltreatment, abuse and humiliation. They feel inadequate, powerless and worthless. Paid work with their maternal role and long hours of unpaid care work. The women domestic workers are more likely to resort to unfavorable coping strategies, such as leaving children alone at home, enlisting the help of an older sibling or young relative, or taking children to work, if allowed, with adverse consequences on children's health and education as well as worker's productivity (Cassier and Addati, 2007:04). The unorganized sector plays a vital role in terms of providing employment opportunities to a large segment of the workforce in India.

² Minimum Wage Policy Guide, -Minimum wages for domestic workers, chapter-8.

Conclusion

Women constitute 70 per cent of the world's poor population or almost 900 million of the 1.3 billion people who live in absolute poverty. Two thirds of the world's illiterate population of 876 million people are women. They produce 50 per cent of the food worldwide but receive only 10 per cent of the incomes. Women's access to and ownership of resources is less than that enjoyed by men and women in other sectors of the society. Women's average earnings are consistently lower than those of men but in the unorganised sector, which accounts for 94 per cent of economically active women, earnings are even lower.

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