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FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS OF INDIA: CHALLENGES AND EMERGENT ISSUES

Abstract. Female domestic workers constitute a neglected group in the unorganized sector of India. They have faced exploitation for decades. In recent years, only Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have expressed concern about their well-being. This paper looks at the challenges and emerging issues associated with the female domestic workers of India. They are very vulnerable in terms of human rights, in particular their living and working conditions. They often work for little pay and long hours, with almost no access to any social protection for prolonged periods. Recently the Central Government announced a few social protection schemes for the unorganized sector, such as the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan (PMSYM) in 2019-2020 or the Atal Pension Yojana (APY) in 2015. This paper aims to examine the living conditions of female domestic workers and their life in India. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), more than 67 million domestic workers worldwide remain excluded from the protection that covers other workers. As recorded in 2004–2005, India was home to 3.05 million urban domestic workers, comprising mostly of women. A large portion of the Indian population is working in this “informal sector”, as defined by the government. At present, there is hardly any law, which protects their rights.

Keywords: domestic workers of India, living conditions, female workers, socio-economic profile

INTRODUCTION

Female domestic workers are neglected within the unorganized sector. They have faced exploitation for decades. Only in recent years, the NGOs have been taking interest in their cause. This paper looks at the challenges and emerging issues associated with female domestic workers of India. They are very vulnerable in terms of human rights, in particular their living and working conditions. They often work for little pay and long hours, with almost no access to any social protection for prolonged periods.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), more than 67 million domestic workers worldwide remain excluded from the protection that covers other workers. As recorded in 2004–2005, India was home to 3.05 million urban domestic workers, comprising mostly of women. A large portion of the Indian population is employed in the “informal sector”. At present, there is hardly any law, which protects their rights.

They are unorganized workers; there are no labour laws to protect their rights or to set out decent service conditions. Lacking unionization, they depend on the

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mercy of their employers. There are no laws, which fix their wages, uphold basic rights or promote social security. There is not even a provision for a holiday or paid leave as compared to any other job. They are also deprived of rights to health care, education, justice, human dignity and respect. With regard to the unorganized labour, the domestic worker is closest to us in our homes. Where is it better to sow the seeds of humanism and human dignity than at home, even in those in which there are no domestic workers – surely we know or hear of their plight. Domestic work has become more “feminized” over time.

The main aim of this paper is to understand the challenges and emerging issues associated with female domestic workers in India. It takes a closer look at the conditions, problems of such women and their lives. The main objectives of this paper are:

- 1) To analyse the reasons behind selecting the job of a domestic worker.
- 2) To look into the social and economic conditions of these workers.
- 3) To engage with their problems at the workplace and at home.

The sources used in this paper are secondary data, available in various reports related to the informal sector. The article derived data from the ILO reports, government reports published by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), National Family and Health Survey (NFHS), research papers and the available literature.

DEFINITION OF FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS

Domestic workers have been defined in multiple ways over time. A few definitions are as follows:

1. An act presented in *Rajya Sabha* (Upper House of the Indian Parliament), entitled “The Household and Domestic Servants (Conditions of Service and Welfare) Act”, GOI 2004, defined domestic workers as:
 - a. “Domestic servants means any person who earns his livelihood by working in households of his employer and doing household chores”, and
 - b. “Housemaid means a women servant who performs household chores for a wage”.
2. The International Labor Organization (ILO) broadly defines a domestic worker as “someone who carries out household work in a private household in return for a wage.” (as quoted in Kundu, 2007).

3. Unorganized Non-Agricultural Workers’ Conditions of Work and Social Security Bill, 2007, has included the domestic servants into the category of wage workers. According to the bill “wage worker means a person employed for a remuneration as an unorganized non-agricultural worker, directly by an employer or through any agency or contractor, whether exclusively for one employers or more employers, whether simultaneously or otherwise, whether in cash and or in kind, whether as a temporary or casual worker, or as a migrant work, or workers employed by household including domestic workers” (GOI, 2007).

Based on the above definitions, a domestic worker is one who carries outhousehold chores. These chores include cleaning utensils, washing clothes, sweeping and cleaning the floor, cooking or assisting the employers in the kitchen, looking after the small children or accompanying them to school, etc., on part-time or full-time basis for a nominal wage.

FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS IN INDIA – REVIEW

Throughout the history of India, domestic work was performed by the ‘low castes’ of Indian society, as caste-hierarchy assigned occupational criteria. They can be labelled as being similar to “serfs”, with no right to education (Gothoskar, 2005). Nevertheless, the concept of employing women as servants for household works is rooted in medieval times and constitutes a characteristic feature of the feudal society. A domestic female servant, also known as a “Dasis” in the feudal age, is not new for the country (Mahadevan, 1989). Under the era of feudal society, the condition of women working in houses was quite dismal. Many centuries later, the economic and social condition of female domestic workers is yet to change.

In recent times, the trend shows that all metropolitan and big cities of India have become hubs to recruit poor women as domestic workers. There are mainly two reasons: one is the lack of availability of jobs in rural and tribal areas, which facilitates the supply of female labour in these cities, and second is a sharp increase of middle-class women employed in the country (Deshkal and FES, 2002). The employed middle-class women require help with their household chores due to hectic jobs, thereby transferring such activities onto the domestic workers. In some cases, it has become upward mobility

and a symbol of status for the middle and upper-middle class of the society to withdraw from household chores and duties (Gothoskar, 2005), leaving the work for the domestic workers instead. Moreover, employing female workers is also cheap, which further promotes their employment in the middle- and upper-class households.

In India, there is a dearth of data about female domestic workers. The Ministry of Labor and Employment has proposed a draft policy on domestic workers, which is still awaiting approval. Since no data is maintained about domestic workers at the central level, the latest available data comes from the National Sample Survey (NSSO), 68th round, 2011–2012, which estimated 39 lakhs of people to be employed as domestic workers by private households, of which 26 lakhs are women.

Although some research papers and literature on women workers are available, they do not cover a complete cross-section of the issue. There is very little information on female domestic workers engaged in household services, or any other work, such as agriculture, construction, sundry and piecemeal jobs (Tripathi, 1991).

Despite the existence of a substantial, special provision in the constitution, as well as various legal and administrative measures to improve the status of women, there has been little change in the socio-economic life of female domestic workers in India. However, few state governments have taken some steps to improve the socio-economic status of these workers. For example, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, Delhi have introduced a minimum wage for domestic workers. Karnataka was the first state in the country to do so, establishing the wage at Rs 1,600 per month for an eight-hour day of domestic work (Hamid, 2006). In 2000, Maharashtra's Labor Board issued guidelines on regulating the services of domestic workers, which included paid leave, travel allowance, fairer wages etc. Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, the government recognized domestic workers as part of the Unorganized Sector of the Economy, which gave them the right to form unions (Sharma, 2003). However, it needs to be noted that these are very few efforts and provisions that support domestic workers, whereas major issues, such as fair wages, holidays, pension and provision of security after work remain unsolved (Hamid, 2006). In recent times, the Central Government announced the launch of social protection schemes for the unorganised sector, such as the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan (PMSYM) in 2019–2020 or the Atal Pension Yojana (APY) in 2015.

RATIONALE FOR CHOOSING A JOB

There are two types of female domestic workers. On the one hand, there is a group of women who are working for additional income or for saving purposes. On the other side lies the majority, who works to earn a livelihood or to survive. There are several reasons or factors behind the choice of domestic work as a profession, but the most important are economic and financial reasons, which push women to get involved in this type of work. Both pull and push factors are responsible for such a selection, although poverty plays the single-most crucial role behind choosing this work. Female domestic workers lack other skills, which makes finding any other work very challenging. Most of them come from marginalized section of the society. They belong either to the lower section or lower class and caste. They work for a very low wage, and sometimes even receive underpaid wages.

Most of the female domestic workers are required to do this job to feed and fulfill basic needs of their families. There is no other way to earn money with little education and no technical skills. In other words “they are familiar with this type of work, it does not extract their energy totally as it happens in construction or other factory works, they get at least some time to look for their families”.

Most studies show that female domestic workers are migrants (migrated either due to marriage or family movement). Most of them started working after marrying, when they realized that their husbands' income is not enough to meet their basic needs. From the family history, it is very clear that most fathers of the women performing domestic work were engaged as agricultural laborers or construction workers, and many of them are landless. However, no female domestic workers who are currently working along with their mothers were willing to take their children to help them in the workplace, indicating a gradual social change.

LABOR MARKET AND ECONOMY

Labor market participation is defined as the proportion of the population engaged in economic activities. The National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) included self-employed and unpaid workers, regular wage and salaried employees, casual workers and the unemployed in its definition of labor force participation rate and presented data for the whole population by their gender.

Table 1. Female usual activities states distribution (for all ages)

Activity status (principal status ps)	Years						
	1983	1987–88	1993–1994	1999–2000	2004–2005	2009–2010	2011–2012
Rural							
1. Self-employed unpaid family work	21	22	18.5	11.4	13.6	10.2	9.4
2. Regular wage work	1.6	2.1	1.3	0.9	1.2	1.1	1.3
3. Casual wage work	18	17	17	11	9	9	6.8
4. All domestic	29.8	27.3	34.4	36.3	35.5	39.9	42.2
4 a. Domestic duties only	15.9	15.1	15.7	20.3	17.5	22	18.5
4 b. Domestic duties and allied activities	13.9	12.2	18.7	16	18	17.9	23.7
5. Unemployed	0.6	1.4	0.5	0	0.8	0.5	0.5
6. Education	7.6	7.2	11.7	18.4	21.3	23.8	25.1
7. Others	21.4	23.1	16.2	22.4	18.4	15.6	14.7
LFPR (1+2+3+5)	41.2	42.5	37.3	23.3	24.6	20.8	18
LFPR + All domestic	71	69.8	71.7	59.6	60.1	60.7	60.2
Urban							
1. Self-employed unpaid family work	8.3	8.5	7.9	4.5	5.4	4.2	4.6
2. Regular work	8.4	9	7.8	4.6	5.7	4.2	4.6
3. Casual wage work	7	6	6	3	2	2.4	1.8
4. All domestic	38.5	38.1	40.2	45.4	45.7	48.2	48
4 a. Domestic duties only	30.8	29.5	30.5	38.4	35	35.9	36.4
4 b. Domestic duties and allied activities	7.7	8.6	9.7	7	10.7	8.3	11.6
5. Unemployed	1.5	1.9	1.8	0.9	1.4	0.9	0.9
6. Education	18.2	18.4	21.8	25	25.1	25.6	26
7. Others	18.1	17.9	14.1	16.9	14.5	13.4	12.6
LFPR (1+2+3+5)	25.2	25.4	23.5	13	14.5	12.8	13.4
LFPR + All domestic	63.7	63.5	63.7	58.4	60.2	61	61.4

Source: based on calculations of NSSO as cited in Abraham (2013).

The above table indicates that from 1987–1988 to 2011–2012, rural female domestic workers' LFPR declined from 42.5% to 18%. The decline in women's LFPR for domestic work results from the introduction of the new scheme – the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) (2005), because this new scheme makes it more suitable for rural women to work. This decline is also due to an increase in self-employment and casual labor work force. The same also took place in the urban areas. From 1987–1988 to 2011–2012, the number of urban domestic female workers

declined from 25.4% to 13.4% due to a sharp increase in self-employment in other non-agricultural businesses.

The table shows that there is discrimination in the rate of male's and female's wages in both rural and urban areas. There is no increase in female wages. On the other hand, male wages have risen in both rural and in urban areas. In 2011–12, the rural wage rate for male workers was Rs 249, compared to the female wage rate of Rs 103. The same happened in urban areas – in 2011–12, the male wage rate was Rs 182 while the female wage rate was Rs 110.

Table 2. Average Daily Wage Earnings of Casual Labourers, ages 15–59 years

NSSO Survey Round	Nominal wage (in Rs)			Real wage (in Rs)		
	male	female	increase in male wage	male	female	increase in male wage
	Rural					
2011–12	149.32	103.28	126.14	45.31	31.4	22.13
1993–94	23.18	15.33	–	23.18	15.33	–
	Urban					
2011–12	182.04	110.62	149.66	52.58	31.95	20.2
1993–94	32.38	18.79	–	32.38	18.79	–

Source: NSSO, 2014.

Table 3. Average Daily Wage Earnings of Regular Wage Labourer, ages 15–59 years

NSSO Survey Round	Nominal wage			Real wage		
	male	female	increase in male wage	male	female	increase in male wage
	Rural					
2011–12	322.28	201.56	263.8	97.8	61.163	39.32
1993–94	58.48	34.89	–	58.48	34.89	–
	Urban					
2011–12	469.87	36.15	391.5	135.71	105.25	57.55
1993–94	78.12	62.31	–	78.12	62.31	–

Source: NSSO, 2014

Table 4. Participation of women (15–59 years) usually engaged in domestic duties (including subsidiary status) in 2011–12

Specified Activities	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
1. Maintenance kitchen garden	24.1	9.6
2. Work in household poultry etc.	38	14
Domestic agricultural activities (1 or 2)	47.3	20
3. Free collection of activities etc.	22.4	5.2
4. Free collection of firewood, cattle fodder etc.	57.8	17
Free collection of goods (3 or 4)	59.8	18.4
5. Food Processing (own produce)	11.1	2.7
6. Food processing (acquired)	6	5.1
7. Preparing cow dung cakes	56.3	20.9
8. Sewing, tailoring etc.	29.3	39.5
9. Free tutoring of own & others children	5.4	12.9
10. Fetching water from outside house	40.4	18.7
11. Fetching water from outside village	1	–
Any of above items (1–11)	89.5	67.9

Source: NSSO, 2014.

Information included in the table further indicates that there is also discrimination in daily earning of regular wage labor and casual labor workers, as in 2011–12 daily wage of a regular female worker was Rs 103, yet in the same year, it was Rs 201 for rural labor. Thus, it is possible to conclude that there are low wage rates for the casual workers, such as female domestic workers. Wages of female domestic workers are also biased in terms of gender, caste and religion.

Table 4 shows that the participation of women in domestic duties varies between the rural and urban areas. In the urban areas, female workers are mostly engaged in sewing and tailoring activities. Notably, despite living in urban areas, maintenance of a kitchen garden, preparation of cow dung cakes and work in household poultry still comprise dominating sectors, in which women are engaged. In the rural areas, females are primarily involved in the collection of fuelwood, cattle fodder and preparation of cow dung cakes.

PROBLEMS FACED BY FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS AT THE WORKPLACE AND HOME

Female domestic workers face many problems, not only at the workplace, but also at home. They are not aware of their rights, thus employers always treat them as slaves. These workers also face discrimination on the basis of a caste they belong to, religion and sometimes regional identities. If a domestic worker belongs to a marginalized section of society, they are not permitted to enter the kitchen belonging to people from the upper castes. There is a division of work among the female domestic workers according to their caste. The caste identity always plays an important role in acquiring any particular type of domestic job.

The main problems faced by such women at the workplace are as follows:

- 1) almost 80% of female workers are not satisfied with their salary and expect more. On average, they are paid Rs 1,000–1,500 for cooking food twice a day, and Rs 200–500 per month for cleaning the floor and washing clothes.
- 2) they do “extra work” when guests visit their employers’ households but employers do not pay for such services.
- 3) there are no paid leaves, which means no work – no payment. They are the basic principles exercised in this job.
- 4) they want at least one free day per week but employers are not in favor of such a demand.

PROBLEMS AT HOME

Most female domestic workers have alcoholic husbands, which are often abusive. They are bound to suffer from their violent behaviors.

- 1) Most women receive minimal economic support from their friends and relatives. They are often subjected to abuse from their husbands.
- 2) These workers are very poor. They joined this work segment as a result of poverty.
- 3) They repeat the same work at home, so that they have double workload – on the one hand, their occupational life and on the other, their own household work.
- 4) These women usually visit state hospitals, but due to the lack of time, they also prefer private hospitals, since they require less of it. Hence, their expenditure increases when their health deteriorates in both situations.

- 5) They also face problems in collecting drinking water, because most of them live in unorganized colonies with little water supply. They usually have to stand in a long line for hours to collect two buckets of water.
- 6) Such workers are not able to pay attention to their children’s education because of inadequate knowledge and poverty.

CONCLUSION

This paper looks at the challenges and emerging issues associated with the female domestic workers in India. It investigates the trends in women’s activity rates in the labor force and domestic activities. In the paper, it is argued that there are several factors, which influenced the division of work within the household. Caste and religion constitute two of the most important ones. Division of work within the household for female domestic workers is also mostly based on these two factors. Lower caste women are prohibited from working or cooking in the kitchen of the upper castes but they are allowed to perform floor cleaning and wash clothes in the same houses. It indicates that caste matters in domestic works.

There are few social security provisions and schemes for these workers. Female domestic workers face many problems at the workplace, as well as in their own homes. They are working under the principle of “No work, no payment”. It is unfavorable for them, because if they become sick, there is no provision that allows them to take a paid leave. They are bound to work for less than the minimum wage because they lack education and knowledge of the market wage rates for domestic workers. The fact that they are not united makes them weak in terms of bargaining power.

After conducting an analysis of the data acquired from the NSSO, it is possible to state that the socio-economic situation of female domestic workers is not good in terms of living conditions and livelihood. They face problems at the workplace and at home. They want to improve their living standard, but the increase of all costs except their wages puts a great burden on these women.

The government of India plans to implement a few regulations to improve the working and living conditions of the unorganized workers in both rural and urban areas. Recently, the Central Government announced the launch of schemes, including the Atal Pension Yojana (APY) in 2015 and the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan (PMSYM) in 2019, which for the first

time included domestic workers in the domain of unorganized labor. However, these schemes only provide for pension after a certain age, for example, the worker will get monthly remuneration after the age of 60, but are silent on the present economic and social condition of domestic workers. Until now, they have been completely excluded from such legislation, even though there are some laws that have regulated matters of domestic workers in past. These regulations also do not include the provisions for the minimum wage and maximum hours of work. The half-hearted laws for domestic workers are not sufficient to improve the life of a large portion of women who always work in unfavorable conditions to survive.

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PRACA KOBIEŃ W INDYJSKICH GOSPODARSTWACH DOMOWYCH: WYZWANIA I PROBLEMY

Abstrakt. Kobiety pracujące w gospodarstwie domowym są zaniechaną grupą w niezorganizowanym sektorze Indii. Od dziesięcioleci są wyzyskiwane, a w ostatnich latach troszczą się o nie tylko organizacje pozarządowe (NGO). W niniejszym opracowaniu przyjrzymy się wyzwaniom i pojawiającym się problemom związanym z kobietami pracującymi w domu w Indiach. Kobiety te są bardzo wrażliwe na swoje prawa człowieka w odniesieniu do warunków życia i pracy. Często pracują za niewielkie wynagrodzenie przez długie godziny i są pozbawione jakiegokolwiek ochrony socjalnej. Ostatnio rząd ogłosił kilka programów ochrony socjalnej dla sektora niezorganizowanego, takich jak Pradhan Mantry Shram Yogi Maandhan (PMSYM) w latach 2019–2020 oraz Atal Pension Yojana (APY) itp. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu zbadanie warunków życia, problemów kobiet pracujących w domu i ich życia w Indiach. Według Międzynarodowej Organizacji Pracy (ILO) ponad 67 milionów pracowników domowych na całym świecie pozostaje wyłączonej ze świadczeń ochronnych, z jakich korzystają pracownicy innych gałęzi gospodarki. Według danych z lat 2004–2005, w Indiach mieszkało 3,05 mln miejskich pracowników domowych, w większości kobiet. Duża część ludności Indii pracuje w tym tzw. „nieformalnym sektorze”, jak określa to rząd. Obecnie nie istnieje prawie żadne prawo, które chroniłoby kobiety pracujące w gospodarstwach domowych.

Słowa kluczowe: pracownicy domowi w Indiach, warunki życia, kobiety pracujące, profil społeczno-ekonomiczny