



CHALLENGES FACED BY DOMESTIC WORKERS AT THEIR WORKPLACE - CASE STUDY OF DOMESTIC WORKERS IN CHENNAI

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ABSTRACT

India's unorganized sector includes a neglected segment of female domestic workers. They have been exploited for many years. Only Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have expressed concern for their welfare in recent years. In terms of human rights, especially given their working conditions, they are extremely vulnerable. They frequently put in long hours with little money while having almost no basic access for extended periods of time.

Due to their socioeconomic circumstances, familial ties, and early deaths of their spouses from alcohol usage, the majority of women rely on domestic employment to support themselves. Due to the fact that their husbands have abandoned them and are now living with another woman, there are numerous deserted women employed as domestic help.

Through various empirical studies, it has been found that these women deal with a wide range of interconnected complex web of issues outside of economic demands at the workplace, including lack of access to drinking water, toilets and equipment that reduces physical strain. They also face issues with weather protection and the availability of leave in the event of illness.

This paper focuses on the case studies of 10 domestic employees in Chennai City who are between the ages of 20 and 40. This paper tries to look at the fundamental issues that Chennai's female domestic employees confront at work.

KEYWORDS: Domestic Workers, Work Place, Basic Access.

INTRODUCTION

Female domestic workers make up a neglected portion of India's unorganized economy. They have long been taken advantage of. In recent years, only Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have



shown care for their welfare. They are very defenseless in terms of human rights, particularly given their working conditions. They frequently work long hours for little pay and endure protracted periods of nearly total lack of access to basic necessities.

A large percentage of domestic employees lack literacy. For income, domestic workers perform a variety of tasks in other people's homes, including sweeping, cleaning, washing dishes, cooking, caring for children, the elderly, and the disabled, as well as taking care of family pets and offering gardening, driving, and security services. The caste system in India contributes to the stigma attached to domestic work by associating jobs like cleaning and sweeping with those who belong to the "so-called low castes."

The majority of women depend on domestic work to maintain themselves because of their socioeconomic situation, close relationships to their families, and the early deaths of their spouses from alcohol consumption. There are a lot of deserted women working as domestic help since their husbands have left them and are now living with someone else.

Why Domestic Work ?

There are two sorts of women that work as domestic help. On the one hand, there is a group of women who work in order to supplement their income or save money. The majority, who have to work in order to make a living or to exist, is on the opposite side. The decision to pursue domestic work as a career is motivated by a number of variables, but the most significant are economic and financial considerations, which encourage women to engage in this line of employment. Although there are both push and pull variables at play, poverty is the primary driving force behind this choice of labor. Female domestic workers lack additional skills, making it very difficult for them to get any other employment.

The majority of them are from socially underprivileged groups. They are either from a lower caste or a lower part of society. They are paid very little, and occasionally even earn wages that are insufficient. The majority of domestic workers who are women must perform this work in order to provide for their families' basic needs, including food. There is no alternative method to make money if you have no technical abilities and little to no education. Or, to put it another way, "they are accustomed to this kind of work, it does not completely drain their energy as it does in construction or other factory work, and they get at least some time to look for their families."

Who is a Female Domestic Worker?

A domestic worker is widely defined by the International Labor Organization (ILO) as "someone who performs household work in a private household in exchange for a wage." cited in Kundu (2007).



According to the aforementioned definitions, a domestic worker is a person who does household duties. Cleaning utensils, washing clothing, sweeping and cleaning the floor, cooking or helping the employers in the kitchen, watching the little children or going with them to school are just a few of the tasks that can be performed on a part-time or full-time basis for a pitiful wage.

What are the Challenges faced by Domestic Workers?

Numerous issues affect domestic employees at work, including caste and untouchability discrimination, low pay, a lack of job stability, greater hours worked, and no emergency leave benefit. This has been discovered via numerous empirical investigations that these women cope with a wide range of interwoven complex challenges outside of economic demands at the workplace, such as lack of access to drinking water, restrooms, and equipment that lowers physical strain. They also struggle with concerns like weather protection and the availability of sick leave.

Most domestic employees lack education, are widows or abandoned women, and are not aware that they need to register with the domestic welfare office. Currently, domestic employees frequently earn extremely low earnings, are required to put in excessively long hours, are not guaranteed a weekly day of rest, and may face physical, mental, or sexual abuse or mobility limitations.

The "informal sector" is where a sizable section of the Indian workforce works. Currently, there are very few laws protecting their rights. They are unorganized workers, and there are no laws protecting their rights or establishing fair working conditions for them. Since they cannot form a union, they are at the discretion of their employers. There are no laws that set their pay, protect their fundamental rights, or advance social security. In contrast to every other work, there is not even a provision for a holiday or paid time off. Additionally, they lack the rights to health care, education, justice, respect, and human dignity.

Case Study of Domestic Workers

In order to get a deeper qualitative understanding of the daily lives and activities of domestic workers, this paper use the case study methodology.

The human side of domestic workers' impoverishment is depicted through the use of case study methodology. This innovative approach focuses on regular encounters and occurrences in domestic workers' lives. Additionally, it looks into each person's particular experience and offers a thorough understanding of their actual living and working circumstances. The foundation of case studies is the direct observation of informal interactions amongst 10 domestic workers in Chennai.



Case Study -1

Parimala, a 35-year-old woman, started working as a domestic at the age of 15. She married an alcoholic, and as a result, she felt compelled to keep doing domestic work .Every day from 10 am to 2 pm, she works. She is employed by 3 homes. Her duties includes washing clothing, mopping, and cleaning the house and kitchen.

She said she doesn't have access to clean water or facilities. In 1 home, 1 cup of tea is offered each day. She typically works on an empty stomach before returning home to eat lunch.She works, which makes her weak and unwell, even when having her period. Even when she is exhausted, she has nowhere to sit. Her employers always keep an eye on her to make sure she is working nonstop.

Case Study -2

Vidhya, a 40-year-old woman, started working as a domestic helper at the age of 26 after getting married and having a child. She works in four homes from 10 am to 3 pm. Her work include cleaning the house, washing the laundry, and mopping the floors.

She lacks access to a bathroom and clean water. In any home, she is not permitted to drink any water. Her employers keep a separate tumbler in which to serve her tea. She is not permitted to use the washing machine that the employer has. She has to wash heavy blankets in her hands most of the time, which is really exhausting for her. She needs to ascend two storeys and bring the clothes in a bucket to dry the clothes.

Case Study – 3

Renuka, a widowed 45-year-old woman, is the mother of two children enrolled in a corporation school in the 10th and 12th grades. She started working as a domestic worker after the death of her husband so that she could educate the kids and make a reasonable livelihood.

She works in two residences. She cooks in two homes and squares batter for idly and dosas as part of her job.

She works from 5 am to 8 am in the morning. She doesn't have access to clean water or toilets. She is given tea and leftover food from the day before that was kept in the refrigerator. She doesn't eat that food every day; instead, she throws leftovers in the trash.She is allowed to use grinder and mixie at the employer's place .



Case study – 4

Jayanthi is a woman in her 45s. She is the mother of a son and a daughter. Son is a dropout while daughter is pursuing her undergraduate degree at Kasi Nadar College in Arumbakkam. She started working as a domestic worker after her spouse passed away in a car accident ten years ago. She is employed by 6 homes. She gets to work at ten in the morning and doesn't finish until six in the evening. Her work includes cleaning. Her job involves utensils cleaning, house cleaning, mopping and washing clothes .

She had her uterus removed and is now unable to lift water at her employer's home, yet she is still made to do it. She doesn't have access to water or toilets. She does not receive a weekly day off. She is unable to take time off from work to see a doctor since she has nail fungus.

Case Study- 5

At the age of 15, Kaveri left Kanchipuram for Chennai after falling in love with a boy. In a short period of time, he moved away from her. She lived her life and worked as a hotel helper. She was taken care of by a domestic worker, and as a result, she started working as a domestic to support herself. she married at the age of 20 and has two daughters. The younger daughter is pursuing her undergraduate degree at Thiruthangal Nadar College in Madhavaram whereas the older one was forced to stop studying due to covid pandemic.

Kaveri is employed by 4 homes. She is at work from 10 to 1 pm. She is responsible for washing dishes, laundry, cleaning, and mopping the house. She has access to drinking water, but not the bathroom. She works every Saturday and Sunday and doesn't take a weekly break.

Only one employer provides her with fresh food; the other two give her spoiled food that has been kept in the refrigerator for several days.

Case Study -6

42-year-old Lakshmi resides with her husband and one daughter. She has diabetes. She is employed by three homes. Every day at 10 am, she begins work and doesn't finish until 2 pm. She has diabetes and is prone to frequent urination, yet she cannot use the restroom. She refrains from drinking water during the day and refrains from eating in her workplace. She consequently has a kidney stone and a stomach issue. Her duties include washing clothing, cleaning bathrooms, and cleaning the house .

Case Study 7

50-year-old Prema resides with her husband and their two sons. Due to the family's financial situation following her marriage, she started working as a domestic worker. She works in 3 homes from 10 am



to 2 pm each day. Her main job is to clean the house and utensils. Her main problem is that she can't use the restroom and that she can't eat on time because of her work demands. She eats breakfast, goes for work, and doesn't eat or drink again until 2 o'clock. This has caused a stomach ulcer, and she now experiences daily discomfort.

Case Study – 8

Gowri, a 40-year-old woman, spends her mornings working in a clinic and her evenings working as a household helper. She is responsible for cleaning and cooking. She spends two hours each at each of her two jobs. She laments the lack of access to restrooms and water. The employer doesn't provide food even though she cooks. Due to her late eating, she has digestive issues. She also stands in the clinic in the morning and then again when she cooks in the evening, which has caused a problem with her varicose veins.

Case Study – 9

A 49-year-old woman named Prabha works as a cook and baby sitter in one home. She is at work from 8 am to 2 pm. Her job entails making breakfast and lunch in addition to caring for the 1-year-old infant. From 8 am to 2 pm, she cannot use the restroom. Breakfast, tea, and lunch are all provided on separate plates and tumblers.

Case study 10

The 38-year-old Ganga resides with her daughter, a B.Ed student at St. Christopher Purasaiwalkam. After her husband abandoned her and married another woman, Ganga, a single mother, started working as a domestic worker. From the morning till the afternoon, Ganga works at 4 homes. Her duties include sweeping the floor, doing washing clothes, cleaning the house and utensils. She complains that there are no toilets and drinking available. She held her urine for a long period of time, which caused a urinary infection.

Discussion

1. The ten case studies mentioned above conclusively demonstrate that none of the domestic employees in Chennai have access to restrooms.
2. Only a small number of domestic employees in the aforementioned case study had access to drinking water.
3. A few women complained that their employers treat them differently and treat them as untouchables by providing them with separate cups and plates.
4. Some of them have access to machines for domestic work



5. The majority of them are compelled to clean bathrooms, which is cruel.
6. They all complained about the long hours and little pay.
7. Domestic employees are not granted any weekly time off.
8. A few domestic workers expressed dissatisfaction over being prohibited from using elevators, even to take water to their employers house
9. No permission is granted on days of menstruation
10. No permission or leave is given for a doctor's consultation.

Impact

1. Domestic servants have developed bladder infections as a result of lack of access to restrooms.
2. Lack of access to safe drinking water causes recurrent lung infections in domestic workers, and some even develop kidney stones.
3. Domestic employees frequently skip meals, which can cause ulcers and stomach issues.
4. Prolonged standing has caused domestic employees to develop nerve problems.
5. They now have nail fungal concerns as a result of their repetitive work in the water.

Social Work Intervention

Domestic work is not only an important source of livelihood for a huge section of uneducated and unskilled women in urban areas, it has also become an important part of the urban life style. Social work intervention is very essential to address the problems faced by domestic workers at their workplace. Social work interventions range from ranges from various stake holders in the community.

NGOs

NGOs working for Women rights and Domestic workers has to sensitize the domestic workers on the basic Human rights and discrimination at work place.

Employers

Employers should be oriented to treat domestic workers as human beings and that they should give access to basic needs for the domestic workers like toilets clean drinking water and food etc.

Community

Awareness programme on policies and legislations pertaining to Domestic workers, Awareness on rights of the Domestic workers should be conducted. Caste discrimination is highly seen in the



community while treating the domestic workers. A sensitization programme should be conducted in the community to eradicate caste discrimination.

There is a need to effectively implement these interventions on a priority basis through good governance.

CONCLUSION

In urban areas, the demand for domestic servants has increased due to the lack of time and the physical inability of the housewives and also due to the emerging modern lifestyle among the city inhabitants. Nowadays, people are very much in need of the help of these domestic workers, but domestic workers are not treated as human beings. Hence this paper is an attempt to focus on the problems faced by domestic workers at their workplace and to emphasise domestic workers should be recognized, valued, respected, and considered as human being and their contribution to their family and nation should be considered.

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