



CHALLENGES OF DOMESTIC WORKERS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

During March 2020, world has undergone complete lockdown to mitigate the contagious effects of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The crisis has reinforced the preexisting inequalities between labour and the capitalist class throughout world. The decline in the global services amidst lockdown has negative effects on the labourers across globe. The informal workers are most vulnerable to the virus effects be it on health or livelihood. Domestic workers are the hard-hitting section among informal workers who may face work challenges even in the post-Covid19 era. As large numbers of migrants are in the domestic service, it increased the importance of examining the effects of the pandemic on the domestic workers, particularly migrants belong to low caste and class. The study will highlight the effects of caste, class, religion, gender in increasing the vulnerability of the marginalized women workers. The study will be descriptive and use an analytical approach to understand the changes in the work lives of women domestic workers during Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *Women workers, Domestic Service, Covid-19 Pandemic, Informal Economy, Social Institutions.*

INTRODUCTION

In the world of work, the domestic service has a unique space for the hitherto labour jurisprudence. The work location of the domestic service is primarily private homes of employers gives it a different place in the world of work that usually involves work place with prefixed agreements and trade unions in factories and mines which is not common in the domestic service (Debasis Poddar 2018).

The care work find recent prominence in research studies when labor economists find while men's time is usually consist of market activity and leisure time, women spend their entire time in home production. Sociologists also support different gender roles for men and women and assign place to men within the labor market and women within home production. Feminists have acknowledged the regressive effects of differential gender roles and their effects in disadvantages women not only at home, but also at work, in politics, and society. The socially designed gender roles enforce double shifts for working women in paid employment and home production and reinforce their marginalization in the workplace (Judith Treas and Sonja Drobnic, 2010).

Domestic work is the single largest employer of women worldwide in which more than 80 per cent of the working population includes women workers. Domestic workers comprise a significant part of the global workforce in informal employment, more often migrant working class, and are among the most vulnerable group of workers. A large part of their service takes place within private households with no specified agreement on the part of the employers and outside the scope of labour laws that protects their interest and provides social security. Presently, there are around 53 million domestic workers globally, excluding child workers, 83 per cent of these workers are women. Domestic work accounts for 3.5 per cent of women's employment and the number is steadily increasing in developing and developed states (ILO 2013 as cited in Judith Treas et. al. 2010).



The Covid-19 crisis have left many in the informal economy jobless and stranded. The crisis has not only exposed frontline workers to health risks but threatened their livelihoods by hampering the global services (Anoop Khanna 2020).

Redefine Domestic Work

Despite the instrumental role of paid care in economic equilibrium within society, domestic work is an undervalued and underpaid job that largely involves women migrants. Domestic work is predominantly performed by women and managed by other women. Over the centuries, domestic work has undergone tremendous changes. For instance, earlier domestic workers have used to attached to a single household and perform one or more work, while now, domestic workers are undertaking heterogeneous activities in different households. The emergence of nuclear middle-class families and urbanization has increase the need of part-time domestic workers. Domestic work performed within non-regulated, isolated and private space and workers negotiate job terms and pay on an individual basis. Their wages are determined according to their work, social status, locality and other labor market factors. There is a hierarchy among domestic workers according to the work performed by them and the pay they received from employers. Despite the largest provider of women's employment and social value attached to the labour, domestic work has no uniform structure of wage, no fixed working hours and number of working days and nature of payment are still unregulated and informal (N. Neetha 2008, Roula Seghaier 2011).

Moreover, domestic work is not just about performing certain functions but the maintenance of social relationships too. In many cases, domestic workers are supposed to work at high standards which even employers may find difficult to undertake. Moreover, the trend of part-time domestic workers has allowed the employers to keep an array of workers to perform different functions which are fragmented. The system of part-time domestic work has allowed them to hire workers suitable to their budget and social background of caste and religion (N. Neetha 2013, Bridget Anderson 2001).

Feminization of Domestic Service and Devaluation of Care Work

Domestic work has a significant role in the growth of the global economy that caused feminization of the service. Currently, 7.5 per cent of all women in paid employment worldwide are domestic workers. The retreat of public sector from relevant services and unequal genders roles have contributed to the feminization of domestic work (Natalie Sedacca, 2019, Supurna Banerjee 2020).

According to ILO studies, in India there are 4.75 million domestic workers, of which 3.05 million are women. However, the research studies and NGO data figures are estimated the numbers as high as 10 million (Patricia Jeffery et al. 2018).

Despite the high women's labour force participation, the attempts to address the traditional division of labour are futile and domestic work is still remaining a feminized area. The sector is invisible in terms of organization of production and productive value despite the feminization and commodification of the domestic service and workers are underpaid. The social perception of domestic work as a feminized area of the economy has led to the devaluation of the service. The concept of feminization of labour acts to marginalize paid and unpaid care labour by justifying suppression of wages and utilization of gender notions around physical attributes used to situate women in the service as naturally suited to such as domestic work. The skills involved in the roles are constructed as low and naturally-given,



further justifying gendered wage-gap. Given this argument, domestic work does not appear to be a livelihood choice by free will but embedded in the hegemonic gender/class ideologies of modern and feudal origin (Ray and Qayum 2009, Kabeer 2000 as cited in Chambers and Ansari 2018).

The work is still portrayed as unproductive and unskilled, devoid of any productive value. Many feminists criticizing the division between reproductive and productive labour and highlight the productive character of the feminized labour such as emotional care since domestic service comprises personal care skills too. Instead of reinforcing the divide between productive and reproductive labour, feminists (Beneria 1992, Boserup 1970, Hartmann 1979) argue that both the labour are part of the continuum and insist on the constitutive value of domestic work for societal reproduction (Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2014).

Social Institutions and Implications for Women Domestic Workers In India

Domestic workers are asked to undertake several duties from cooking, cleaning, laundry, dishwashing to care for elderly and children. However, no uniform job description is provided for this work. Rather domestic service for women is seen as an extension of their conventional household responsibilities. Their entry into domestic service and allotment of tasks are shaped by institutions of caste, gender and religion. The complexities of domestic work in India cannot be understood without engaging with the question of caste, class and gender hierarchies. These hierarchies have later become a site of domination, discrimination and exploitation of the domestic worker and domestic work helps maintaining a system of class subordination (Upasana Mahanta and Indranath Gupta 2019).

Raghuram's study on the impact of caste and gender in the organization of domestic work in India revealed that one's caste identity as Brahmin determine one would receive work of cooking, while a Dalit domestic worker is assigned into work of waste removal and other dirty tasks of cleaning and maintenance. The logic of purity and impurity is always present in India determining that a low caste worker is either not get a job or involved in dirt-related tasks and menial jobs involve hygiene (Raghuram 2001, Swaminathan 2015 as cited in Chetan Sinha and Mohit Kumar 2018).

The work relationships in the domestic service are not regulated and employer displays their authority while giving duties in a sporadic manner. The employer-employee relationship is reduced to discretion to individual employers bounded by personal interests and moderated by social institutions of caste, gender, religion and class. The division of tasks on the caste-basis has created the hierarchy among women domestic workers (Glenn 1992 as cited in Rhacel Salazar Parrenas 2015).

Domestic workers are subjugated along lines of class and ethnicity and employers have constructed their class position in a manner that echoes their material culture and self-making through consumption in ethnographic accounts on care-focused research. Grover highlights that language skills and cultural capital are profitable assets in the service of paid care. Domestic workers have to renegotiate their class position and identities in the service which is conventionally seen as low status and stigmatized in an attempt to represent the service as skilled and respectable (Shalini Grover, Thomas Chambers and Patricia Jeffery 2018).



Covid-19 and The Impact On Domestic Workers In India

The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought unprecedented changes in societies and amplified socio-economic crises. The severity of its effects on health has pushed the government to take urgent measures to reduce the contagion. The pandemic has altered labour markets by business closures, quarantine and movement restriction. The restriction on movements across regions during lockdown has caused a severe damage to the livelihood of many workers (Abdul Azeez E P et. al. 2020, Laura Foley and Nicola Piper 2020, Anoop Khanna 2020).

Migrant domestic workers are witnessing challenges that question their survival and health during Covid-19. The absence of labour regulations and social protections has left them expose to exploitation, harassment, violence and forced labour (ibid).

While pandemic has raised public health concerns across the world, the frontline nature of domestic work has made workers vulnerable to infectious virus. There is widespread insecurity among domestic workers of falling into poverty after their loss of livelihoods during Covid-19. Female-headed households are significantly affected by the virus and unable to meet daily expenses during lockdown (Dandub Palzor Negi et. al. 2020).

As domestic workers are supposed to work in homes, they are at risk of catching the virus and facing violence due to deteriorating mental health of people due to mobility restrictions. On the other, shutting down of schools and jobs has increase burden of women workers who have responsibilities of school children (ibid).

A survey study by Jan Sahas 2020 reveals that 92 per cent of migrant workers have lost their livelihood during crisis while 42 per cent of them have no food access. Many domestic workers are expected to not return to worksite and are struggling to meet even basic needs. The shutting down of schools, Anganwadis and parks has negatively affected them as their children have no access to online education. High prices of essential goods and health services have turn to be a great challenge during the closure of private clinics and restrictions on public health facilities (A. Azeez E P ET AL. 2020, Roula Seghaier 2020).

Migrant workers being outsiders to the city and not having local entitlement has resulted in the othering of migrant workers and their exclusion from governmental measures. The situation is worse in India as access to healthcare and social support schemes is always a struggle for migrant workers (ibid).

Conclusion

Domestic workers are facing numerous challenges at the workplace given their lack of access to health and safety protocols during pandemic. Women workers are facing risk of domestic violence at the hands of employers during the lockdown due to the lack of legal protection and dignity attached to their work status. Some NGO (Jan Sahas) reports reveal that domestic workers are not allowed by employers to join the services during lockdown nor given salaries and asked to resume their jobs. Many of them are being captive under lockdown and not allowed to move out to reduce virus exposure while continuing job. Thus, lockdown is a great challenge to care workers as it risks their health besides job security (Roula Seghaier 2020).



To make domestic work a safe livelihood option, it is suggested to humanize the relationship between employers and workers and attach dignity to their labour. There should be grievance redressal mechanism for the workers to address their concerns. A central legislation should be in place to define domestic workers as unorganized workers by government and offer benefits entitled to the unorganized workers. The formalization of contracts between them will help ensure regulations and protections like paid leaves, fix wage and social benefits. The provisioning of domestic workers welfare board and community welfare board can also play a constructive role in ensuring the economic survival of the workers especially during Covid-19 pandemic (Elizabeth Devi Kh 2020).

The authorities at all levels and employers should reach out to all migrant workers and disseminate the information on Covid-19 risk, safety measures and facilities. All migrant workers should have medical assistance and access to free or low-cost Covid-19 test and treatment (Sankaran 2013, Foley et al. 2020).

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