



## Working & living conditions of domestic workers: Indispensable yet unprotected

Geetika Sachdeva, Stuti Arora

JD Birla Institute, Affiliated to Jadavpur University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

### Abstract

The study investigates the working & living conditions of the domestic workers in Kolkata. A purposive and convenient sampling technique was employed. The sample comprised of total 220 respondents, covering total 48 full time workers (24 male workers and 24 female workers) and 172 part time domestic workers (76 male workers and 96 female workers). The data was gathered using two sets of questionnaire: a) a survey questionnaire by Indian Labour Organization (ILO) and b) a self prepared questionnaire along with 4 case studies conducted. The objective of the study was to study the demographic profile of the domestic workers and to investigate the problems in living and working conditions among male and female workers. It concludes that female workers were economically underprivileged as compared to male workers. The living and working conditions of male workers were better than the female workers. The work done by female workers were undervalued and unrecognized.

**Keywords:** working conditions, living conditions, domestic workers, male domestic workers, female domestic workers

### 1. Introduction

The ILO (International Labour Organization) Convention on Domestic Workers (No. 189), defines domestic worker in its Article 1, 5 Article 1 For the purpose of this Convention: a) The term “domestic work” means work performed in or for a household or households; b) The term “domestic worker” means any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship; c) A person who performs domestic work only occasionally or sporadically and not on an occupational basis is not a domestic worker.

Provision (a) is meant to cover both domestic workers who are members of the household and live with the household (live-in domestic workers) and domestic workers who are not members of the household and do not live with the household but work as domestic worker for that household (live-out domestic workers). Provision (b) is meant to exclude persons performing domestic work in or for the household who do not have an employment relationship such as members of the family who are taking care of the house without an employment relationship. Finally, provision (c) is meant to exclude persons performing domestic work on a casual basis such as the babysitter or the handyman bringing the purchases made at the supermarket [1, 9].

### Working & living conditions

A domestic worker is directly under the authority of a householder & follows the straight instructions of the house owner for the work. The work done by domestic workers may include- cooking or cleaning, taking care of the children, elderly or disabled, tasks that are usually performed by women in the vast majority of societies. However, domestic work may also include- gardening, chauffeuring or providing security services, driving, tasks which are often performed by men. It is found that among all categories in the informal sector, domestic servant's income is the lowest & the

problems are many [2, 10, 12]. 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 [26, 3].

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. 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 [4, 11]. 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 [5, 7].

A study conducted by the researcher focussed on the working and living conditions of women domestic workers. It was seen that there was lack of core entitlements which was required to enjoy freedom guaranteed by the democratic society. The findings of the study showed why it was important to create a comprehensive social security system for domestic workers in India. The study even covered themes such as basic demographic features, nature of services, work profile of the domestic workers, access of social security, consumption of edible items, union awareness, attitude of domestic workers towards gender & domestic violence [8].

The ILO Convention protects the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work of the ILO (Article 3). It recognizes that domestic work is undervalued and invisible and is mainly carried out by women and girls (Preamble). Thus it states clearly that Members shall take measures to ensure that domestic workers, like workers generally, enjoy fair terms of employment as well as decent working conditions (Article 6),

enjoy minimum wage coverage (Article 11) and be paid directly in cash (Article 12). Requirement is made that Members set a minimum age for domestic workers (Article 4), ensure that domestic workers enjoy effective protection against all forms of abuse, harassment and violence (Article 5), has the right to a safe and healthy work environment (Article 13), and of social security protection, especially in respect to maternity (Article 14). The Convention also recognizes that domestic workers are often migrants (Preamble), and contains provisions that are specifically addressed to their migration status<sup>[1, 13]</sup>.

### Aim of the study

The present study aims at understanding the working and living conditions of domestic workers. The study includes both male and female domestic workers belonging to low socio income group.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Sample Selection

The total number of sample respondents was 220 out of which 172 were part time workers (76 male workers and 96 female

workers) while 48 were full time workers (24 male workers and 24 female workers) from Kolkata district. Out of these 220 samples, 88 domestic workers including both part time & full time were approached from 6 centers of Kolkata District. There were centers for maids & servants while other 3 were driver centers. The age group of the respondents covered young adults (20-40 years) and middle adults (40-60 years). The sample method used was Purposive Sampling & Convenient Sampling Technique

### 2.2 Tools for Data Collection

In the present study, the type of research method applied is Descriptive Research. There were two questionnaires used for the study which included both open & close ended questions. a) A Survey Questionnaire was used from the study - "*Study on Living and Working Conditions of Domestic Workers in Cambodia by International Labour Organization (ILO)*"<sup>[14]</sup>. b) A self prepared Questionnaire was made as well., c) To delve into the depth of the study, 4 case studies were also conducted; one of male worker & the other of a female domestic worker respectively.

## 3. Results and Discussion

**Table 1:** Demographic Profile of Domestic Workers

Demographic characteristics of respondents	Highest responses by full time female workers	Highest responses by full time male workers	Highest responses by part time female workers	Highest responses by part time male workers
Age Group	41-50 years	41-50 years	30-40 years	41-50 years
Native place	West Bengal	Bihar	West Bengal	West Bengal
Educational Qualification	Between standard 1-5	Between standard 6-10	No qualification	Between standard 6-10
Marital Status	Widow	Married	Married	Married
Duration of employment	More than 8 years	More than 8 years	More than 8 years	More than 8 years

Table-1 demonstrates the demographic characteristics of the domestic workers. The highest age group of the respondents was between 30-50 years. All the respondents had work experiences between 20-25 years which validates with the age group. The young adults were less in number as now days with the change in time the choices of people have also changed. Previously as we used to see more number of domestic helpers but the young adults in present are now trying to find different career opportunities and providing themselves with proper education for the same. Almost majority of the respondents belonged to West Bengal while among full time male workers comparatively a larger group was from Bihar. The remaining group of respondents belonged to different states of India like Jharkhand; Orissa, Chennai and even few countries like Nepal and Bangladesh. The number of migrants was less in the present study. The educational background of women was more deprived as compared to men workers because women workers were of the opinion that their education was not of much importance according to their parents. Among male workers, the parents tried to make them educated so that they can do a better work for improving the living conditions of the family. Full time female workers had highest number of widows and as they did not have any support system for income they had to work as full time workers for their and family's living needs. The rest of the respondents were married.

The working and living conditions of the workers were unrecognized. There are many different categories of work done by a domestic worker which includes: cleaning, cooking, dish washing, gardeners, watchman, caretakers, etc. Among these categories the household chores were seen to be done by women in majority, while work such as driving, gardening and security services were given to men. In the present study, the results show that the percentage of male household workers was comparatively low as compared to drivers, gardeners and watchman. The majority of household services among male workers were found in full time category. Almost all the workers were provided with meals on a regular basis except part time male workers as majority were drivers so they were not given any meals. Among full time workers both male and female workers were given an accommodation. While the percentage of full time male workers were more as compared to female workers who were not given any separate space but were told to sleep inside the kitchen itself.

The salary received by male workers was more as compared to female workers. The majority percentage of female workers earned a salary between the ranges 5,000 to 10,000 respectively. While among male workers the maximum salary distribution was from 8,000 to 16,000 respectively. The salary distribution for women workers was even lesser than 5,000 per month. The female part time workers working hours were less as compared to male workers. But the amount of work

done by female was more. It has been noticed that the female workers are given more work to do that they receive the salary. They have to do all the household chores and still their salary is less. It is told that household work is no that difficult that someone should be given a high pay while the same work if done by a male increases the value as male workers are not much seen doing the household chores. So the residences who acquire male workers as domestic helpers have to pay more salary to them as they will give to a female worker. The working hours for most workers were included between 10-14 hours each day while among part time females the working hours were between 5-9 hours per day. Even though the working hours of female part time workers were less, they

worked in more than 1 household each day. They try to give 1 hour at each household where they do various different works. Almost half percentage of the part time female worked in one household for 8-9 hours. Among the rest of the workers the majority of respondents said that they worked in one household. The domestic workers had a mixture of responses for their resting periods. In general, if the percentage was calculated for all the responses it will be found that most of the workers got time to rest in between their working hours. Even though the resting hours varied in hours but the worker did get some time to rest starting from less than an hour to more than 2 hours per day.

**Table 2:** Number of leaves taken in monthly basis by the Domestic Workers

Division of the leaves taken	Full time Female workers	Part time Female workers	Full time Male workers	Part time Male workers	Total Percentage
No leaves	21	39	19	21	45%
Once a week		21	2	44	30%
Once a month	1	14	1	5	10%
Twice a month	2	14	2	4	10%
More	0	8	0	2	5%

**Table 3:** Number of leaves taken in yearly basis by the Domestic Workers

Division of the leaves taken	Full time Female workers	Part time Female workers	Full time Male workers	Part time Male workers	Total Percentage
No leaves	2	28		10	18%
Less than 15 days	7	36	8	12	29%
More than 15 days	15	32	16	54	53%

In table-2 and table-3 the leave taken by the domestic workers in monthly and yearly basis have been shown. From the above tables, it can be said that the female part time workers do not take much leaves as they feel their living and working conditions are poor and that is the reason they only prefer to take leave at the time of emergencies. Among the migrant workers including male and female, the leaves are not taken in weekly or monthly basis but on a yearly basis. Every once a year they visit their native place. Among rest of the remaining workers the leaves were taken in a weekly basis which automatically increased the total number of leaves in a year.

Almost all the workers responded that they were not mistreated in the workplace. While a small section of respondents said that they face verbal abuse, reduction and late payments in salary or no grant for leaves. The majority of the respondents said that they do not have any paid leaves which they are informed by the employers while they start working. Some of the workers were not facing any mistreatment in current household but had faced sexual and verbal abuse in their previous household but they never filed any complaint against the employer. A majority of respondents were the only earning member in their family. The domestic workers had difficulty in managing their living conditions with the amount of salary received. But among the workers who received a good amount of salary it was manageable but for others, especially female workers it was a difficult work to handle their household as they were the highest earning member of the family and their earning was very less to fulfill the needs and requirements of the

household. Male workers were the highest earning member of their families and most of their spouse was housewives. Among female workers even though their husbands were working but their salary was either less or equal to the female workers. The relationship of the workers with their spouse and children were quite good. Only a small section of workers said that they did not have a good bond with their spouse. The workers were of the opinion that the communities where they stay help them a lot at the time of any crisis which is not given much from their own relatives. The workers were of the opinion that the government does not provide any help to them in any terms. Some of them said that they have BPL cards, which help them in getting discount in ration and medical help but it is not enough for them. They still have to take loans from other higher authorities, most of the time from their employers and by the end of the month they do not have any savings.

### 3.1 Case Study

Rekha Gayan (40 years) works as a domestic worker in Kolkata district. Her hometown is in Subhashgram Petua district of Kolkata. She does not have any educational background. She is a part time domestic worker. She has been working as a domestic worker since 23years. She earns Rs.5,000 per month. She started working as domestic worker when she was 15 years of age. She said it was very difficult for her to work initially but with time she got used to managing her work and own household. She told she do all sorts of domestic work, “ranna kori, safai kori, kapod muchhi”, which means she

does cooking, cleaning & washing.

The worker told that as she belongs to low background the household owners think that they have right to disrespect her. She has experienced verbal abuse in almost all the households since 20 years. She said that, “aami onek baje baje kotha sunechi, amake ora churir korar oo dosh diyeche. Barir choto rao amake somman diye kotha bole na” which means that she has to hear a lot of abusive words from the house owners and even she has been blamed for stealing stuff from the household where she used to work. Even the children of household owners’ talks to her with disrespect most of the time.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the light of above data analysis, interpretation and case studies, it can be concluded that despite of efforts been put by the society and government in helping the domestic workers, there is still a lot of changes to be made. The domestic workers are a very important and necessary part of everyone’s life. If for one day a worker does not come the entire work has to be done by us that make us realize the value of a domestic helper in our lives. But despite of the importance of having a domestic worker it can be said that women workers are economically disadvantaged and undervalued with the work they perform as domestic helpers as compared to men.

#### 5. References

1. Geneva. Domestic Workers across the World: Global and Regional Statistics and the Extent of Legal Protection. International Labour Office, 2013.
2. Hazarika B, Ghosh S, Chattopadhyay A, Majumder A, Kumar S. Women Domestic Workers: Their Life, Problem and Dream. Centre for Women’s Studies University of North Bengal, Darjeeling, West Bengal, 2002.
3. Hersch J. The effect of housework on earnings of husbands and wives: Evidence from full-time piece rate workers. *Social Science Quarterly*. 1985; 66:210-217.
4. Jagori. Rights & Vulnerabilities. A Research Study of Migrant Women Workers in the Informal Sector in Delhi, 2004.
5. Mehrotra ST. Domestic Workers: Conditions, Rights and Responsibilities. A study of part-time domestic workers in Delhi, 2010.
6. Menon S, Kalyani, Bhan G. Swept Off the Map. Surviving Eviction & Resettlement in Delhi, 2008.
7. Palriwala, Rajmi, Neetha P. Paid Care Workers in India: Domestic Workers & Anganwadi Workers. Unpublished Report, Geneva: UNRISD, 2009.
8. Paul B, Datta SR, Murthy V. Working and Living Conditions of Women Domestic Workers: Evidences from Mumbai. Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Deonar, Mumbai, 2011.
9. Razavi S, Staab S. Underpaid and overworked: A cross-national perspective on care workers. *International Labour Review*. 2010; 149(4):407-422.
10. Shelton BA. The distribution of household tasks: Does wife’s employment status make a difference? *Journal of Family*. 1990; 11:115-135.
11. Shelton BA, Firestone J. Time constraints on men and

- women: Linking household labor to paid labor. *Sociology and Social Research*. 1988; 72(2):102-105.
12. South SJ, Spitze G. Housework in marital and non-marital households. *American Sociological Review*. 1994; 59:327-347.
13. Toit DD. Exploited, Undervalued, and Essential: Domestic Workers and the Realisation of their rights. University of Pritoria, South Africa, 2013.
14. Tous S, Veasna N. Study on Working and Living Conditions of Domestic Workers in Cambodia. International Labour Organization ILO, 2009.