

Problems of Women Domestic Workers in Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT-- Domestic workers - who sweep, swab, wash, cook, take care of the children and look after the elderly – yet, are invisible. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), "A domestic worker is someone who carries out household work in a private household in return for wages." The poor and marginalized women are now joining the growing force of domestic workers in Indian towns and cities. In this backdrop, this research work aims at understanding the socio economic background of women domestic workers and problems faced by them in Thoothukudi District in Tamil Nadu. This particular region was selected for research as it has large number of women domestic workers due to seasonal employment in Salt and Fishing sectors. One hundred women domestic workers were selected as sample through Purposive Sampling method and the required data were collected from them by using a semi structured interview schedule designed for this purpose. The study results show that the poor economic condition of family drives the women to opt for domestic work and they are exploited by the employers in many forms. They possess a very low status both in the workplace as well as in the society. They work for a paltry sum and are at the mercy of their keepers without any rights. The study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive policies and legislations to control the exploitation of women in unorganized workforce. Domestic Work should be declared as a profession and as such all the rights and privileges as applicable to all other workers are made available to them. Establishing Self help groups in their area and giving training in income generating activities will certainly go a long way to empower them.

Keywords: Women, domestic, workers, empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Domestic workers are addressed by different names-maid, ayah, and 'jhee'. Generally, the domestic worker's work includes sweeping, mopping, dusting, cleaning dishes, washing clothes, cooking, clearing the table after meals, hanging up the washing, picking, and dropping children to bus stops, and often more. The term "domestic" also denotes a class of "menials" which includes many types of workers, like ayah, kitchen helper, cook and sweeper [8]. Therefore the term is restricted to domestic servants as "those servants who do cooking, care the children, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, cleaning and sweeper the payment of wages". Domestic worker is one who works within the employer's household [1]. The International Labor

Organization (ILO) has a clear definition of a domestic worker: "someone who carries out household work in private households in return for wages". The ILO also estimates that worldwide, domestic work is the largest employment category for girls under the age of 16 [9]. Yet despite the extent of this form of labour, there are no international standards to regulate the conditions of work or the wages of domestic workers [2]. The amount of skill, technical know-how, and training required to do all these domestic chores may vary from little to vast.

The work expected from these workers may be either 'part-time' or 'full-time'[10]. Part-time work implies that these workers will perform their duties within a stipulated time-frame and then, after the work is completed, proceed for their homes [3]. The working hours of women domestic workers are not fixed. It varies between three to fifteen hours [11]. The work may be continuous or installments spread over time. The working hours depend on the demands and requirements of the employers. The wages of domestic workers are abysmally low when compared to other categories of workers even within the informal sector, considering the amount of time, effort, and labor that goes into domestic work [4]. Very often, wages are added along with food and clothes and of all these together would amount to a value equal to the efforts put in by the worker. The mode of payment of domestic workers may be in 'cash' or in 'kind'. Women domestic workers are vulnerable and open to exploitation. Right from being economically exploited by those who mediate and help them get their jobs, to employers, to being socially ostracized, to being physically abused, domestic workers have to take it all in their stride. Domestic service continues to be an important occupation for unskilled women all over the world [5]. In most countries domestic workers are subject to working conditions that can be considered exploitative-involving long hours, low wages, no benefits, a high dependence on the employer for food and housing, limited freedom of movement and restricted access to means of communication [6]. Such conditions prevail irrespective of the migratory status of the women. Because many are married and come from the lower socio-economic strata of the countries of origin, their migration is seen as a strategy to secure needed family income [7].

CONDITIONS OF DOMESTIC WOMEN WORKERS IN INDIA

Nearly 90 percent of domestic workers are women, girls

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or children, ranging from ages 12 to 75 and it is estimated that 25percent are below the age of 14. The majority of women domestic workers are illiterate. In India, the stigma for domestic work is heightened by the caste system. Domestic workers are highly exploited and denied just and humane wages. Domestic workers are paid well below the minimum wage for unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Labour laws do not cover domestic workers. They are not recognized as workers; hence do not enjoy legal protection, rights and dignity. Domestic workers are victims of suspicion [7]. If anything is missing in the house, they are the first to be accused with threats, physical violence, police conviction and even dismissal.

Maharashtra Domestic Workers Welfare Board Act 2008 says that women and girls are estimated to make up 95 percent of India’s domestic workers, who are believed to number more than five cores though no hard and reliable estimates are available. As in the rest of India’s vast informal sector, these workers have to cope with job insecurity, a high vulnerability to ill-health, low wages and exploitation (including sexual) in the workplace [12]. New features of domestic work have worsened conditions in the sector. Increasingly, young girls from tribal areas are being brought to cities by placement agencies that not only financially exploit them but place them in homes where they find themselves extremely vulnerable in alien conditions. Several sociologists have conducted studies on the issue of migration. Migration is intrinsically correlated with the issue of women domestic workers migrating to places outside their homes in order to make a living. The study reflects the sexual and economic exploitation, lack of childcare and education, and increase in workload as part of the enormous economic and socio psychological costs of migration [7].

Women domestic workers in south India found that only 27 percent employed women were paid salary [9]. The socio-economic conditions of these workers indicate their helplessness. Most of the families of the women had incurred heavy debts. Accordingly, alcohol abuse and domestic violence were the common practices in many families. Socio-economic and health conditions of women in Madras state that more than 50 percent of the employed women were part time domestic workers and most of them were employed in more than two houses, stomach ailments menstrual problems, anemia and general weakness were the women problems reported by the women domestic servants [11]. Hence, this study is most important to understand the issues and challenges of women domestic workers in Tamil Nadu.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In India, a large majority of domestic workers are women. Work implies that these workers will perform their duties within a stipulated time-frame and then, after the work is completed, proceed for their homes. So, this study to explore why women involved in domestic work in India, focusing specifically on factors that influence decision-making at the household level. This Study also looks beyond poverty to explore the range of social and cultural factors in household decision-making about domestic working women, and attempts to trace their working conditions, family adjustment, migratory status of women domestic

workers, family indebtedness, reasons for joining as domestic worker, type of work undertaken by women domestic workers, employer-employee relationships, problems at work place, reasons for job dissatisfaction and expectations of domestic workers in continuity of job.

OBJECTIVES

- Examines the socio-economic background of women domestic workers
- Highlights the work life pattern and problems that women domestic worker’s experience at work place

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

The data for the paper is drawn from a larger study on the status of women domestic workers in Thoothukudi region in Tamil Nadu. A descriptive design has been made to analyze the above said objectives. Women domestic workers in the age group 20-60+ years who work within the household were chosen as respondents. Of the 100 respondents selected through purposive sampling method and semi-structured interview schedule was designed to collect information purpose. The collected data were analyzed with the help of simple statistical tools.

Table 1

Age Vs Monthly Income of the Respondents

Age Vs Monthly Income					
age	Respondents by their monthly income				Total
	below 3000	3000-6000	6000-9000	above 9000	
20-30	0	1	11	2	14
30-40	0	6	19	3	28
40-50	3	7	17	11	38
50-60	6	4	0	2	12
Above 60	1	4	1	2	8
Total	10	22	48	20	100

From the above table shows that majority (38percent) of the respondents belongs to the age group of 40-50 years in which 17per cent of them earns the income group category of ₹.6000-9000 the rest of them comes under the income group of more than ₹9000, ₹.3000-6000 and less than ₹3000 respectively. This table shows that the majority of the income category groups are middle of the experience in the domestic work. Furthermore, this age group containing the widows, separated from their family and they crossed their reproductive age. Since, they are married, they could look after the domestic work well and hence they would have been preferred by their employer’s. Unfortunately widowed women, who had lost their life partner as well as the earning head of the family, did not have any alternative but to join the work force as domestic worker.



Table 2
Education Vs income of the Women Workers

Education Vs Monthly Income					
Educational status	Monthly Income				Total
	below 3000	3000-6000	6000-9000	above 9000	
cannot read and write	1	7	1	3	12
	4	1	7	6	18
can sign only can read only	1	6	7	6	20
	4	7	20	4	35
primary secondary	0	1	13	1	15
Total	10	22	48	20	100

In considering the educational qualification of the respondents, exactly half (50 percent) of the respondents were either illiterate or having only functional knowledge. Majority (35 percent) of the respondents belongs to the primary level of education in which 20 per cent of them earn between ₹.6000-9000; the rest of them come under the income group of ₹.3000-6000 and less than ₹.3000 and more than ₹.9000 respectively. The overall educational background of the respondents and their occupation indicate their poor social status and reasons of holding average income category.

FINDINGS & RESULTS

Since the study area, Thoothukudi is dominated by Hindu families except a few, majority of women domestic workers belong to Hindu families. Among all, number of them belongs to the age group between 40-50 years and the age group of the women respondents more than 70 per cent falls between 20-50 years. This clearly indicates that the practice of domestic work is more common among women in the age group up to 50 years. From the analysis of native place of the respondents, it is clear that more than half (61percent) of the women domestic workers hail from rural areas. Caste group of domestic worker indicates more than half (54percent) of the respondents belong to Backward Castes; followed by Scheduled Castes (33percent) and the remaining (13percent) of them are Forward castes. It indicates the fact that most of the women domestic workers are of Backward and Scheduled Castes and it reflects the low social position that the domestic work is accorded traditionally. In other words, the occupation and caste status appears to be closely inter-related. An in-depth enquiry reveals that upper caste families prefer only domestic servants of their own or similar status for various reasons. Surprisingly more than 70 per cent of the women domestic workers were married and another group of about 18per cent is either a widow, divorced or separated who lived without their spouses. This clearly shows that majority of married women were found in the domestic work and they have to shoulder the dual responsibilities of taking care of both their masters as well as their own families. Since, they are married, they could look after the domestic work well and hence they would have been preferred by their employer's. Unfortunately widowed women, who had lost their life

partner as well as the earning head of the family, did not have any alternative but to join the work force as domestic worker. Accordingly, unmarried women domestic workers living with their parents were being forced by the family poverty, thus it shows that the economic necessity and compulsion by the family either due to loss of the earning of husband, or unemployment and underemployment of husband is the dominant reason for women to choose domestic work. In considering the education qualification of the respondents, exactly half (50percent) of the respondents were either illiterate or having only functional knowledge. This educational level suggests that majority of rural respondents have low counterparts in the urban areas.

More than half (62percent) of the women domestic workers have migrated to the area of study due to marriage, for getting job and for husband's service. This is because of the increasing dependency in the nuclear families and thereby this economic compulsion is a reason for women thinks to work. The overall educational background of the respondents and their husbands indicate their poor social status and reasons of holding low paid jobs. More than half of the respondent's household size consists of 4-8 members. About nearly half of the women domestic worker's household size is less than 4 members. The trend of being away from small family norms and practices of keeping large family size in the respondent's families indicate the family economic pressure which has forced them to undertake this job.

The economic conditions of women domestic workers further shows that more than half (58percent) of them do not have their own house to live in. Hence, they have to depend on rented houses which were indeed a difficult task in their small earning. further it is found that whatever type of houses they have occupied, in about 62per cent respondents houses, there is just one room where they have to carry on all the activities with both adult and young members of the family, the over-crowd living style, no doubt, would increase the possibility of developing the behavior such as smoking and drinking among the young children. The family monthly income of the women domestic workers shows that 46 percent of the family's monthly income comes only up to ₹ 12500- ₹ 15000, whereas rest of the family income goes below ₹ 10000/- in these days, it is really difficult to meet the overall economic demand of the family. Because of this, they are further forced to take dept either by the money lender or employers or the relatives. About 41 percent of the respondents are indebted and another 59 percent of them are free from it. By and large said, when they fail to meet family necessity of different kind, it forces them to go on borrowing loan. More than three-fifth of women domestic workers have accepted that family poverty and bad behavior of their husband have been the main factors for undertaking the present work. Another important factor for their backwardness and low economy shows that about half of the respondent's husbands are drunkards and others were chain smokers. So far as the treatment of employers of the domestic workers is

concerned, nearly half, that is, 47 per cent of the domestic workers have reported that they get verbal abuse from their employers and rest observed normal treatment. Similarly, on being late or absent to job, 70percent of the women domestic workers treated badly while being late and rest experienced normal treatment by their employers. This shows comparatively that on being late, employers take it more seriously than being absent. This may be mainly due to the fact that because of this, the problem in managing time and whole days' work gets disturbed out of it.

SUGGESTIONS

- The study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive policies and legislations to control the exploitation of this unorganized workforce.
- Domestic work should be declared as a profession and as such all the rights and privileges as applicable to all other workers should be made available to them.
- Income-generation opportunities should be provided in order to bring them out from the vicious circle of poverty.
- Establishing self-help groups in their area and giving training in income generating activities will certainly go a long way to empower them.
- Unlike workers, working in organized sector and enjoying better conditions of work, the women domestic workers in the area of study are far behind from it they get neither satisfactory wage nor job security.
- Government and non-government should collaboratively for the awareness programmer among women domestic workers especially widows and divorcees about the welfare schemes.

CONCLUSION

The important reason behind women workers being late for the job are the illness, work fatigue, young child care responsibility, arrival of guests, and bad weather, etc., During the health illness or nonappearance they send their substitute, especially their children or co-workers. Nearly half of the respondents do not send their substitutes, whereas rest of them sends other domestic worker or other family members as their substitute. It means those workers, who have made this kind of adjustment with other domestic workers and do not wish to get their salary deducted, thus send their substitute. The important reasons for workers dissatisfaction are low wage, heavy workload, bad treatment by their employer and long distance between the work place and their homes however, 35percent of them are dissatisfied with present job mainly due to the low wage and bad treatment by their employer.

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Dr. Fabian Andrew James has completed his PhD in the field of Management specializing in the area of HR and published more than 25 articles in renowned journals including scopus indexed journals. He has completed his post graduation in the field of Human Resource Management in Madras Christian College and undergraduate degree in Loyola College, Chennai. He has acquired a graduate certificate in Human Resource Management from Swinburne University, Melbourne, Australia in 2007. He has more than 9 years of corporate experience in the area of shipping and logistics as well as Human Resource Management.



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