



Contemporary Issues, Problem and Challenges in India

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CHAPTER - 16

Socio Demographic Profile of Domestic Workers in Chennai

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Abstract: *Domestic workers remain a highly feminized sector with more than 80 per cent of all domestic workers are women. The rise of the middle class and attachment to social status in keeping domestic workers helped heightened the rise of domestic workers in India. There is an ongoing debate about their status and issues and it is in this interface that this paper explores the socio-economic profile of domestic workers. Findings pointed in the direction where the nature of work contributed towards their lower social standing which is characterized by lack of protective social measures. The paper highlights the need to draw minimum social measures to uplift their working conditions and the need to view domestic work from economic imperatives and their contribution towards providing employment.*

Keywords: *Domestic Workers, Demography, Socio-Economic*

Introduction:

Domestic workers remain a highly feminized sector (Toit, 2013), even though a substantial number of men work in the sector – often as gardeners, drivers or butlers. More than 80 per cent of

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all domestic workers are women. Domestic work accounts for 7.5 percent of women's wage employment, and in some regions as many as one in three (Middle East) and one in four (Latin America and the Caribbean) female wage workers are domestic workers (ILO Report, 2013). At least 53 million people are employed in private homes as domestic workers (Ibid). They carry out essential tasks for the household, including cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping, and caring for children and elderly members of the employer's family. Urbanization and the rise of the middle class have paved the way for the rise of domestic workers. However, despite their contributions and forming an important working section of the society their status remains low. Discrimination, gaps in legal protections, and the hidden nature of their work place domestic workers at risk of a wide range of abuses and labor exploitation. Around the globe, domestic workers endure excessive hours of work with no rest, non-payment of wages, forced confinement, physical and sexual abuse, forced labor, and trafficking. According to the UN Report (2013) millions of domestic workers around the world lack protective laws.

Taking into consideration the changes that have occurred it cannot be simply viewed as the extension of historical feudal culture where the rich and the royal employed servants. The rise of the middle class and the social status attached to keeping domestic workers has tremendously heightened the scope to absorb domestic workers in India. Even though domestic work has gained momentum in the society, especially in the urban society, domestic work, however, continues to be considered as inferior work both by the workers, the employers and the society at large. The undervaluation of domestic work has contributed to the existence of exploitations. Domestic workers are frequently underpaid, and have to work longer duration without receiving substantive extra benefits.

Different Categories of Domestic Work:

The convention No. 189 of the International Labour Conference of the International Labour Organization defines domestic work as "work performed in or for a household or households". This work may include tasks such as cleaning the house, cooking, washing and ironing clothes, taking care of children, or elderly or sick members of a family, gardening, guarding the house, driving for the family, even taking care of household pets. Under the same Convention, a domestic worker is defined as "any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship".

In the Indian context, domestic work is generally defined in terms of types of work performed and the time spent at work, i.e., in the employer's home. Live-out and live-in are two distinct categories of domestic work. Live-in are those domestic workers who live along with the family they are employed by. Live-out work is primarily of two types: first, those who work in one house for the whole day and go back to their homes in the evening, and those who work in different houses, moving from one to the other, performing one or more tasks in each household. Another form of part-time live-out work is in terms of piece-rate. It is often applied to washing clothes and wages are calculated on the basis of buckets of clothes.

Area of Study and Data Collection:

The study is on the women domestic workers of Sherkhan Thottam slum in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The slum lies in the central region according to the divisions of slums in Chennai. Out of 150 women domestic workers 40 women (which are 25 percent of the population) were selected as respondents, using a simple random sampling method. A pre-tested interview schedule was used to collect primary data for the study.

Results and Discussion:

Table -1 shows the age distribution of the respondents. From the table it is clear that the highest percentage of the respondents (40 per cent) belonged to the age group of 30-45 and the distribution of respondents with the age group of 15-30 and 45-60 are the same, i.e., 30 percent each. This signifies that age is an asset to the poor and it attracts young and middle age groups. The result also further indicated that age is not a barrier for entry into domestic work. Domestic work has the ability to absorb labour as long as the person wants to work and has the capacity to do the work. This aspect of ease of entry with less specialized work requirements attach people to work as domestic workers. From field notes, it was noted that it attracted the middle age group to work as domestic workers as it does not involve much laborious workloads.

Table-1: Age Distribution of Domestic Workers

| Age Group | Distribution of Respondents | |
|-----------|-----------------------------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| 15-30 | 12 | 30 |
| 30-45 | 16 | 40 |
| 45-60 | 12 | 30 |
| Total | 40 | 100 |

Source: Field data

Table - 2 presents the educational qualifications of the respondents. Educational level of domestic workers is low with 37 percent receiving education till primary level. Illiterates comprised 30 per cent while 20 per cent have studied up to middle class. Only few of the respondents have received education till high school (10 per cent). Among the respondents, only 1 per cent have attained a higher secondary level of education. From this finding it implies that domestic work attracts people with less education level thereby

opening up space for people to get inducted into the labour market with ease who would otherwise be left unemployed. This further asserts the importance of domestic work in the economy.

Table-2: Educational Qualification of Respondents

| Educational Qualification | Distribution of Respondents | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| Illiterate | 12 | 30 |
| Primary (1-5) | 15 | 37 |
| Middle (6-8) | 8 | 20 |
| High School (9-10) | 4 | 10 |
| Higher Sec (11-12) | 1 | 3 |
| Total | 40 | 100 |

Source: Field data

In terms of income, respondents' monthly income was captured and grouped it into five categories as presented in Table No. 3. From the table, it is clear that a majority of the respondents (65 per cent) earn a monthly income of 1500-3000, 20 percent of them earn 4500-6000. It can be inferred from the table that income drawn from domestic work is low. As it is not a high paying job, this also contributed to the social standing of domestic work which formed to occupy a lower position in the hierarchy of work . From the interaction it was known that two of the most important deciding factors on their income are the number of houses they work for and working hours. One of the respondents said that she worked in four houses in a day and spent about 3 hours in each house. Considering the hour given to it and the multiplicity of working from house to house, earning is low. And the absence of social protective measures worsens their conditions that channelized it to view domestic work as a private entity rather than to be seen from the economic imperatives it contributed.

Table-3: Monthly Income from Domestic Work

| Monthly Income | Distribution of Respondents | |
|----------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| Below 1500 | 2 | 5 |
| 1500-3000 | 26 | 65 |
| 3000-4500 | 2 | 5 |
| 4500-6000 | 8 | 20 |
| Above 6000 | 2 | 5 |
| Total | 40 | 100 |

Source: Field data

Place of Origin and Working Conditions:

Table-4 depicted the place of origin of respondents. From the table it is seen that the majority of the respondents (80 percent) hail from the state of Tamil Nadu, where 45 per cent are originally from Chennai city while 35 per cent have their place of origin from other regions of Tamil Nadu. In addition to it, Chennai attracted domestic workers from neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh where 20 percent of the respondents' hail from it.. It was found that even those who came from Andhra Pradesh have learnt Tamil language. This shows that the make-up of Chennai city attracts domestic workers from different places and has the capacity to absorb workers in informal sector.

Table-4: Place of Origin

| Place of origin | Distribution of Respondents | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| Within Chennai | 18 | 45 |
| Outside Chennai within Tamil Nadu | 14 | 35 |
| Outside Tamil Nadu (Andhra Pradesh) | 16 | 20 |
| Total | 40 | 100 |

Source: Field data.

Table - 5 shows the results on the leave taken by the respondents in times of need. The percentage of those who took full leave and those who take no leave are the same (35 per cent each). And 20 percent of them do not go for a second round of work which means they get a half-day holiday. During field interaction respondents reflected that the majority of the general population has not regarded domestic work as a full time regular job that required leave, but for us we feel we need a day off like any regular job. In the words of one worker, who described the lack of day off and the need for instituting day off in the lives of domestic worker stated;

We too are human being, at times we need a time off to spend with our family, if not

for ourselves to do things we want to do. Being absent a day without prior permission usually amounts in cutting a day's wage.

Commenting on the gravity of these issues, the UN Report too suffices to the findings where millions of domestic workers around the world lack protective laws, long hour working duration with no rest day.

Table-5: Leave from work in times of necessities

| Leave from work in times of necessities | Distribution of Respondents | |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| Take full leave | 14 | 35 |
| Entrust the work to other family members/ no leave | 14 | 35 |
| Do not go for second round of work | 8 | 20 |
| Not applicable | 4 | 10 |
| Total | 40 | 100 |

Source: Field data

Table-6 represents the length of work during pregnancy. Majority of the respondents (55 percent) worked till the 9th month of pregnancy. This is very significant data showing that domestic work, though it is a daily basis work, is not a regularized job. There is no maternity leave. Getting leave amounts to reduction of wage and this puts off workers to take a day off prompting them to work till their maximum capacity. This is also suggested by those other 25 percent of respondents who claimed to take leave of absence without paid. Despite being a low pay job with no substantive incentives, the need to work 24/7 does not deter them to shift nor quit the job implies domestic work form part of their livelihood, an important source of income for their household. Findings highlight some of the pertinent issues that are faced by domestic workers in terms of their working condition. Their working conditions are devoid of substantive protective social measures where wage is determined by working day.

Table-6: Work during pregnancy

| Work during pregnancy | Distribution of Respondents | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| Less than 4 months | 2 | 5 |
| 4-6 months | 6 | 15 |
| 7-8 months | 6 | 15 |
| Till 9 th months | 22 | 55 |
| Not applicable | 4 | 10 |
| Total | 40 | 100 |

Source: Field data

Conclusion:

The socio economic characteristics pointed in the direction that domestic work attracts people who fall within the youth and middle age group with less educational qualification and skill. Ease of entry, generating low income along with lack of social measures positioned to place domestic work in the lower hierarchy of work. In addition to it, the nature of work characterised by lack of protective social measures contributed towards their lower social standing. Despite the existence of unfavourable conditions it continues to attract people and placed a predicament to be seen as an important livelihood of the people. The paper concludes with the need to draw a policy that can ensure domestic workers with minimum protective social security.

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