
Everyday Challenges Faced by Domestic Workers: An Empirical Study among Female Domestic Workers Living in Chan Para, Salugara, Siliguri

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Abstract: *The involvement of women in the informal labor market constitutes a longstanding phenomenon, which has witnessed a notable escalation over time. Presently, the informal labor sector encompasses a substantial proportion of women, particularly those migrating to urban areas with limited educational attainment. This paper endeavors to meticulously examine the myriad problems and challenges confronted by women engaged in domestic work, elucidating their strategies for navigating these obstacles while sustaining their daily employment. A particular focus is dedicated to unmarried domestic workers who commenced their labor at a young age. Notably, the domestic labor force in this context often juggles multiple household responsibilities within a day, yielding meager remuneration. Primarily possessing rudimentary educational qualifications, these domestic workers predominantly hail from socially marginalized backgrounds, encompassing various castes, religious affiliations, and geographic origins, with a significant proportion migrating from rural settings due to multifarious reasons. The research inquiry centralizes on delineating the challenges encountered by women domestic workers within their occupational milieu. To address this inquiry, the author proposes a methodological framework integrating diverse data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews, unstructured interviews, participant observation, snowball sampling, and purposive sampling. The study site is Chan Para Salugara, situated in Siliguri, West Bengal, where the multifaceted dynamics of domestic labor are to be scrutinized and analyzed.*

Key Words: *Women domestic workers, challenges, rights and wellbeing.*

Introduction

In India, it is estimated that over four million individuals are engaged in domestic work (Deshingkar et al., 2008). This sector continues to persist as an unregulated and disorganized industry, characterized by a lack of formal recognition for its workforce, who are commonly referred to as “informal help” (Deshingkar et al., 2008). Remarkably, their remuneration, on average, falls significantly short, amounting to merely one-third of wages found in other sectors (Deshingkar et al., 2008). The terminology “domestic worker” serves as a prevalent descriptor for this unstructured realm of employment (Deshingkar et al., 2008). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), “domestic work” is defined as labor undertaken within one or more households. Those individuals engaged in domestic work within an employer-employee relationship are categorized as domestic workers (Chen, 2011). Notably, the demographic composition of this workforce predominantly comprises female housekeepers (Lalrempuii & Elizabeth, 2020). A “domestic worker” often assumes responsibilities that encompass an array of household tasks, including cleaning, housekeeping (commonly referred to as “housekeeping”), and the provision of care to dependents, encompassing children and elderly individuals (Lalrempuii & Elizabeth, 2020). Duties may extend to encompass culinary, laundry, ironing, grocery procurement, and sundry housekeeping chores, with some domestic employees also residing within the households where they work (Sharma, 2001). A subset of domestic workers resides in the very households where they are employed (Chen, 2011). These individuals provide services to their employers on a continuous and routine basis, with remuneration typically provided in the form of either cash or kind (Lalrempuii & Elizabeth, 2020).

Domestic work is seen as a low job which could easily be carried out without any skills and impure occupation traditionally performed by people, mostly women and children, whose lives are still dominated by a caste system that assigns people his/her place in the society (Anderson, 2000). They face many challenges because their work is not considered and that their decent works are continually ignored (Anderson, 2000). The working hours are determined by the needs and demands of the employers (Anderson, 2000). Given the time, effort, and labour required for domestic work, domestic workers’ salaries are extremely low when compared to other job categories, even within the informal sector (Anderson, 2000).

For individuals residing with the employers, wages are frequently added to the cost of their food and clothing. Domestic employees may be paid in 'cash' or 'kind' depending on the situation (Lalrempui and Elizabeth, 2020). There is no set norm that must be followed in this regard; instead, it relies on the verbal agreement (Lalrempui and Elizabeth, 2020). Similar to Lalrempui and Elizabeth (2020), the authors of this paper identify a significant challenge confronting employed women. The execution of their professional activities is often hindered by interruptions stemming from childbirth. A considerable number of women encounter difficulties in rejoining their pre-pregnancy occupations, consequently experiencing downward mobility that may manifest in accepting low-paying, part-time positions with restricted employment rights.

In contemporary India, female paid domestic workers (PDWs) represent a significant portion of the informal labor force, comprising around two-thirds of the total domestic workforce (Thakkar, 2023). The field of domestic work is commonly stigmatized, associated with low social status, servitude, and perceptions of being menial and unclean (Thakkar, 2023). Many female domestic workers with painful and untold stories were encountered during the research in Siliguri. It was observed that they expressed, "We are doing this to survive and provide education to our children whom we wished to see another life style". The occupational activities undertaken by domestic workers within private households in Siliguri serves a critical purpose, providing insights into the essential responsibilities they shoulder, from culinary tasks to caregiving duties. This delineation sheds light on the functions crucial for household functioning and emphasizes the regularity and constancy inherent in these tasks. Examining factors such as geographical proximity of workplaces and transportation modes enriches scholarly comprehension of domestic labor engagement. Similarly, scrutinizing the adversities faced by domestic workers, including job security and workplace safety concerns, offers valuable insights into the challenges of the domestic labor landscape. The paper enhances academic discourse and informs practical efforts to improve working conditions and support systems for domestic workers, benefiting policymakers, labor advocates, and employers.

Literature Review

Caregiver and Domestic workers

The term "caregiver" may be employed as an alternative descriptor for domestic workers due to their consistent prioritization of caregiving within

the scope of their responsibilities (Folbre & Nelson, 2000). Within the conceptual framework of caregiving, two pivotal components warrant examination: (1) Caring Activities and (2) Caring Feelings (Folbre & Nelson, 2000). Activities encompassing tasks such as the changing of diapers or the provision of empathetic listening are inherently classified as caregiving activities (Folbre & Nelson, 2000). Caring Feelings, on the other hand, denote the caregiver's emotional investment characterized by concern and affection, which serve as motivational catalysts impelling the execution of their responsibilities not solely as obligatory duties but also as emotionally charged actions (Folbre & Nelson, 2000). It is pertinent to acknowledge that these two facets can exhibit variations among individuals, contingent upon their accrued work experiences in the capacity of caregivers (Lyon, 2011).

In the context of the “marketization of care,” monetary considerations assume paramount significance within the caregiving milieu (Folbre & Nelson, 2000). This orientation towards financial priorities may, at times, engender a deviation from the cultivation of genuine care feelings (Folbre & Nelson, 2000). Consequently, when monetary concerns assume precedence within the realm of caregiving, caregivers may exhibit a proclivity towards the mechanistic fulfilment of their duties, marked by impersonality and a conspicuous absence of sincere affection towards their professional responsibilities (Folbre & Nelson, 2000).

Furthermore, the performance of caregiving activities can deteriorate into a mechanized routine bereft of the inherent qualities of concern and affection, thus engendering impersonality in the caregiving process (Folbre & Nelson, 2000). Notably, distinct variances exist in the settings wherein caregiving is dispensed, delineating formal “professional” caregiving, characterized by remuneration and formal structuring, from informal caregiving, typified by its familial orientation within domestic confines (Folbre & Nelson, 2000). Notwithstanding these categorical distinctions, an underlying homogeneity emerges between these two domains of caregiving (Folbre & Nelson, 2000). Notably, women assume a predominant role within both formal and informal caregiving paradigms (Folbre & Nelson, 2000). Moreover, it is salient to observe that tasks integral to both these domains often entail intimate and potentially stigmatized forms of labor, colloquially designated as “dirty work,” further compounded by its relatively low societal status (Folbre & Nelson, 2000).

Inherent challenges abound within the caregiving vocation, particularly in instances where caregivers are unable to meet their self-imposed standards (Folbre & Nelson, 2000). During the course of research, the researchers encountered an illustrative case – a 23-year-old caregiver who candidly delineated her challenges. In her account, she articulated instances wherein she found herself subjected to blame in situations where infants cried without apparent cause. She recounted the additional burden of enduring harsh criticism when confronted with challenges in maintaining effective control over the child or in affording herself the luxury of adequate rest and leisure during the course of her caregiving duties.

Challenges of Women Domestic Workers

Women engaged in domestic work confront a myriad of challenges that often elude widespread recognition, thereby rendering them as constituents of one of the most vulnerable segments within the labor force (Lalrempuii & Elizabeth, 2020). This vocation constitutes a primary wellspring of employment opportunities within the informal sector, proffering a semblance of routine labor for indigent and unskilled women dwelling both in urban and rural domains (Lalrempuii & Elizabeth, 2020). The predicament is further compounded for women laboring as domestic aides within urban localities, predominantly because they are frequently non-indigenous to the areas in which they are employed (Anderson, 2000; Kakati & Tamuli, 2022).

Migrant domestic workers typically emanate from economically deprived rural backgrounds and, by virtue of their extant legal, economic, and political circumstances, find themselves dispossessed of the entitlements accorded to female domestic workers (Blackett, 2021; Kakati & Tamuli, 2022). This confluence of factors bespeaks an array of tribulations, characterized by the lack of societal recognition for their labor as legitimate employment, thereby culminating in the ceaseless infringement upon their rights to a modicum of decent work (Blackett, 2021). Notably, the idiosyncratic character of their workplace conveys an inherent obscurity, amplifying their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse (Blackett, 2021).

Historically, domestic labor has borne the ignominious reputation of constituting a menial and unclean occupation, predominantly carried out by women and children hailing from socially disadvantaged strata. Consequently, women engaged in this form of work are often bereft of the due reverence and equitable treatment from their employers, even in the contemporary milieu (Lalrempuii & Elizabeth, 2020). In comparison to their counterparts in the

organized sector, Women Domestic Workers (WDWs) are further beleaguered by an intrinsic dearth of institutional support, unity, and collective capacity (Lalrempuii & Elizabeth, 2020). As a corollary, these workers frequently witness their entitlements to a dignified labor relegated to the periphery, as the singular nature of their profession exposes them to an augmented susceptibility to the predations of exploitation and abuse (Lalrempuii & Elizabeth, 2020).

Although a significant portion of women work in this industry, there is still a lack of clear statistical understanding. The industry suffers from issues such as poorly regulated low wages and a deficiency in policies (Sahni & Junnarkar, 2019). Within this contextual framework, the undertaking of an exhaustive inquiry into the predicaments encountered by female domestic workers situated in urban areas assumes significant relevance. The impetus for the selection of this research topic emanates from the conviction that the study's findings may offer valuable insights to a broad spectrum of stakeholders invested in the amelioration of conditions for women engaged in domestic work, with a particular focus on Siliguri. Furthermore, it promises to furnish a comprehensive overview of the prevailing circumstances surrounding domestic workers at the national level. Consequently, the research paper endeavors are concentrated on elucidating the array of challenges confronting female domestic workers and the strategies they employ in their daily quest to navigate these challenges. The research problem underpinning this study pertains to the identification and comprehension of the challenges encountered by women domestic workers within their workplace environments. In order to elucidate this overarching research problem, a set of delineated research objectives are posited

- a) The first objective of the paper is to analyze the categories of occupational activities domestic workers are primarily engaged in.
- b) The second objective is to examine the adversities confronted by the domestic workers in the workplace.

Methods

The methodological framework adopted in the course of research endeavor is predicated on a multifaceted approach, encompassing in-depth interviews, unstructured interviews, and participant observation. In addition, the utilization of snowball and purposive sampling techniques has been instrumental in the selection of appropriate respondents drawn from the target population. This

methodological rigor ensures the comprehensiveness and robustness of research findings, thereby substantiating the credibility and validity of the study's outcomes.

The researchers chose one particular locality Salugara located in Siliguri in the state of West Bengal. It was difficult to study the entire location therefore researchers chose small portion of area where around 70 plus houses are consist of in order to do the research. Researchers enter into the family through interaction and casual talk. Before entering into the dialogue, the area was visited once just to become familiar with the people, especially the women domestic workers. Every evening, a walk was taken to meet them because it's impossible to meet them during the day as they all go to their workplace.

Data collection was initiated with family visits, gradually entering into dialogue using the research questions prepared. Additionally, unstructured questions were utilized according to the field settings. Participation observations helped to observe the respondent's behaviour. Fifteen domestic workers were interviewed for the studies from the particular locality chosen locality.

Empirical Findings

Daily activities of domestic workers in their workplace

Based on observation and interaction with respondents (total 25), researchers found out that the domestic workers are engaged in various activities such as;

Activities Table

Sl	Activities involved	Percentage
1	Cooking	86%
2	Preparing lunch for the children	13%
3	Leaning and dusting the house	93%
4	Taking care of elderly	13%
5	Caring for a baby	6%
6	Washing and ironing the clothes	33%
7	Gardening	13%

The aforementioned activities pertain to the responsibilities undertaken by domestic workers when they engage in their work within private households. Fundamentally, their duties remain consistent on a daily basis, particularly for those employed by a single family. A significant proportion of these workers exhibit a preference for proximity to their workplace, facilitating a daily commute that mitigates extraneous expenditure. The majority of these domestic workers labor within a convenient walking distance of 10 to 15 minutes from their respective residences. However, there exist a minority for whom employment necessitates the utilization of alternate modes of transportation, such as tuk-tuks, buses, or bicycles.

An investigation was conducted to assess their subjective perception of the ease or difficulty inherent in their occupation. Diverse responses emerged from the domestic workers. Some individuals expressed contentment with their work, particularly when juxtaposed with outdoor labor, which exposes them to the elements. The notion of having a “permanent job” to sustain their livelihood was appreciated. In certain instances, families employed two to three domestic workers who could alternate their tasks on a weekly or monthly basis, in accordance with agreements among themselves or their employers.

This flexibility in work allocation imbues a sense of relief and job satisfaction, a universal aspiration shared by individuals across various vocations, irrespective of their nature of work. The purview of domestic workers often extends to culinary and cleaning duties within these households, often located within apartment complexes due to the nature of their employment. Consequently, their workday typically spans a duration of 4 to 5 hours, with tasks encompassing meal preparation, housekeeping, and dishwashing, as necessitated by their contractual obligations.

For those domestic workers who serve two to three different households, the duration of work allocated to each residence equates to a two-hour commitment before transitioning to their subsequent appointment. Part-time domestic workers engage in their occupation for a period ranging from 4 to 5 hours, while some extend their labor to encompass a minimum of 8 to 9 hours, depending on the specific circumstances. Conversely, full-time domestic workers do not adhere to a rigid temporal constraint; instead, they are granted a 1.5-hour respite during their workday. Their daily labor commences at 6 a.m. and concludes at 9 p.m., with occasional instances of being unable to take a break due to heightened work demands.

Adversities that Domestic Workers Confront in the Workplace

The inquiry advances to the second question: what challenges do domestic workers confront within their occupational milieu? Respondents expounded upon the multifaceted problems and difficulties inherent to their respective workplaces. An inquiry into their dynamics with employers was also undertaken to gain a comprehensive understanding of these challenges. A substantial number of participants shared their experiences, with a subset articulating concerns surrounding the formal nature of their employment, despite having dedicated nearly two years to their duties. These individuals articulated a sense of constraint, whereby they were unable to engage in open dialogue or voice their opinions, owing to an obligation to unreservedly adhere to their employers' directives.

Some employers exhibited a lack of understanding when domestic workers necessitated leave, be it due to health issues or to allocate time for familial responsibilities. Domestic workers conveyed instances where their job security was jeopardized through threats of termination, an unsettling prospect that left them feeling muted and vulnerable. Furthermore, grievances pertained to salary deductions attributable to absentee days and periodic delays in wage disbursement. Of the 14 respondents, only two reported occasional benevolent gestures from their employers, expressed in forms of additional support or tokens of appreciation for the services rendered.

An added dimension to the domestic workers' experience involved safety concerns in the workplace. Perceptions of security varied, with domestic workers generally feeling more secure in households that comprised both spouses. However, an undercurrent of insecurity permeated work in male-only households, particularly during nocturnal hours, owing to prevalent societal perceptions regarding the potential for untoward incidents. Internal dynamics also surfaced as a source of conflict among workers, stemming from a myriad of causes, including jealousy, disputes over workload allocation, and discrepancies in salary distribution. These internal frictions occasionally eluded employer awareness.

Physical strain emerged as a noteworthy challenge, attributed to the relentless and demanding nature of their work. These workers also underscored their difficulty in allotting leisure time to their families. Fatigue often prevented them from engaging in late-night social interactions upon returning home,

irrespective of adverse weather conditions. Rain or shine, domestic workers were bound by their occupational obligations, signifying the unyielding imperative to secure their livelihoods and support their families.

In addition to workplace challenges, domestic workers were also encumbered by domestic concerns, including financial constraints necessitated by their children's educational expenses, healthcare-related exigencies, and the responsibility of caring for elderly parents or in-laws. These familial tribulations, in turn, cast a pall over their capacity to focus on their work and maintain a high level of concentration. Balancing the demands of their family lives with their professional responsibilities represented yet another dimension of the challenges faced. Full-time workers, in particular, contended with curtailed personal freedom, being obliged to accompany their employers even on personal errands, such as shopping.

Domestic workers concede that they navigate an array of daily challenges stemming from various sources. They recognize that these challenges may occasionally result from their own shortcomings, though not invariably. Feedback and critique offered by employers incentivizes them to strive for enhanced work quality. When confronted with particularly daunting challenges that elude resolution, some may contemplate transferring their employment to another household, albeit with an awareness of the associated risk to job security.

Domestic workers grapple with a dual spectrum of challenges, both within their familial domains, concerning their immediate family and relatives, and within the workplace, concerning their relationships with their employers. These multifaceted challenges manifest on a daily basis, and relief materializes when domestic workers share these burdens with individuals capable of empathizing with their predicaments, be they their parents, close relations, or friends grappling with analogous challenges. When queried regarding the engagement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in organizing awareness or sensitization programs, respondents indicated a lack of awareness concerning such initiatives within their local context.

Summary and Conclusion

The text discusses the challenges faced by female domestic workers in India, particularly emphasizing the unregulated and disorganized nature of the sector. The research sheds light on the low wages, lack of formal recognition,

and societal perceptions that contribute to the vulnerability of domestic workers. It also explores the caregiving aspect within domestic work, highlighting the impact of marketization on genuine care feelings. The challenges faced by women in this profession, especially migrant workers, are discussed, along with the historical stigma associated with domestic labor. The study aims to identify and comprehend the challenges faced by women in domestic work, offering insights into their daily struggles.

The methodology involves in-depth interviews, unstructured interviews, participant observation, and the use of sampling techniques to gather data from 15 domestic workers in a specific locality. The findings cover the types of activities engaged in by domestic workers, their working conditions, and the challenges they encounter. The challenges include issues with job security, workplace safety, internal conflicts, physical strain, and balancing family responsibilities.

The primary objective of meticulously analysing the categories of occupational activities undertaken by domestic workers within private households holds significant importance for several reasons. Firstly, such analysing allows for a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental responsibilities shouldered by domestic workers, ranging from culinary tasks to caregiving duties. By delineating these activities, the study sheds light on the essential functions that sustain domestic work and contribute to the smooth functioning of households. Moreover, emphasizing the regularity and constancy inherent in these tasks underscores their significance in the daily lives of domestic workers, particularly those employed by a single family unit. Additionally, examining the geographical proximity of workplaces to residences and the modes of transportation utilized provides contextual insights into the occupational milieu, thereby enriching scholarly comprehension of domestic labor engagement. Ultimately, by delving into these aspects, the study enhances academic discourse surrounding domestic work, facilitating a deeper understanding of the occupational engagement of domestic workers.

Similarly, the secondary objective of scrutinizing the adversities encountered by domestic workers within their workplace environments is equally crucial. By elucidating the multifaceted challenges faced by domestic workers, including issues such as job security, leave accommodations, salary deductions, and workplace safety concerns, the study provides valuable insights into the complexities of the domestic labor landscape. The firsthand testimonies

provided by respondents offer a nuanced perspective on the adversities pervading domestic work, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by domestic workers. Such insights not only inform academic discourse but also have practical implications for policymakers, labor advocates, and employers seeking to improve working conditions and support systems for domestic workers. In this way, addressing the second objective of the study contributes to the advancement of knowledge and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting the rights and well-being of domestic workers.

The research underscores the urgent need for foundational data on initiatives and schemes for the benefit of female domestic workers. The study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by these workers, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of their predicaments. The findings emphasize the multifaceted nature of challenges, both within the workplace and in personal lives, and the coping strategies adopted by domestic workers. The conclusion calls for further evaluation of existing programs and the efficiency of these initiatives in addressing the diverse challenges faced by women in domestic work. Overall, the research advocates for improved conditions, recognition, and support for female domestic workers, particularly in urban areas like Siliguri.

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