



DOMESTIC WOMEN WORKERS IN INDIA – A CASE STUDY OF KARIMNAGAR DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

The Domestic work is indirect form of slavery system. The majority of women workers have been working continuously in home based works. Slavery would be considered a harsh term by most Indians who employ domestic workers but the reality is that even today in many homes, the domestics especially those who work full time are often no better than slaves. They are usually in debt to their employers and work their whole lives to pay off the debt. Generations work to pay off the debt. And it never really ever gets paid off. They are on call 24 hours of the day, 365 days in the year. And they can never ever dream of freeing themselves from such bondage. How can laws intervene in such situations? There is a less mobilization among the Domestic Women Workers around the country, particularly, in the state of Telangana. For these reason, no common platform to support the Domestic Women Workers for their Economical development. The organization of domestic workers among themselves is very important. A systematic mobilization is needed to help them in making their own associations and unions so that they can share some solidarity and build their own leadership.

Introduction:

In India, the majority of domestic women workers are working under the unorganized sector. Anyway, the following international attentions on domestic work, India have begun to address the issue by the inclusion of domestic workers in some of its legislation governing working conditions. The first is the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, which did not include domestic workers within the schedule. Four states (Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh) have made amendments to extend this protection to them. The new legislation providing social security protection to unorganized workers is the first to explicitly include domestic workers. The unprecedented attention given to domestic work in the past few years provides an opportunity to look at public policy implications for domestic workers. Although there have been legislative initiatives regarding domestic work performed by children as hazardous work and fixing minimum wages for workers in some states, paid domestic work sector continues to be addressed inadequately. The implications of the new ILO instruments, the convention as well as the background paper, are being examined with a view to changes in public policy.

There is no specific occupation for Domestic Women Workers in India, particularly in Telangana State. The most of women workers are doing various occupations at the onetime. Subsequently, the Domestic Workers they sweep, they swab, they wash, they cook, they take care of our children and our pets, and they look after our elderly. We see them every day. Yet they are invisible. Yes, millions



of women, men and children India's large force of domestic workers, or 'servants', as most people call them remain unseen, undervalued and denied rights that all workers deserve. This is a subject to which we are forced to return every now and then. Sometimes it is a tragedy that forces us to think. Of course, laws alone cannot deal with a problem that constantly plays hide and seek. For decades, trade unions have been campaigning for recognition of domestic work as a form of labour. Our diligence and persistence has resulted in some States initiating legislation.

However, more than 90 millions of Domestic workers are working in India. The tribal women and weaker sections of people are the main victims of Domestic Workers. However, the laws and policies are not properly protecting these Domestic workers in India. Most labour laws face the challenge of implementation but amongst the most difficult must surely be the ones linked to domestic work. To begin with, there are no clear statistics of the number of people working as paid labour in people's homes. The estimated number of domestic workers in India is 90 million but this is probably an underestimate as there has been no systematic study to document such workers throughout the country. From the data that exists, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of domestic workers are women and girls. There has been considerable documentation of the abuse young girls, in particular, suffer at the hands of their employers. Every day, changes in the economy and developmental policies are pushing more people into domestic work. With extended families being replaced by nuclear families, there is increasing demand for domestic workers. This ought to push up wages. But simultaneously, the increasing number of infrastructure projects and industries are displacing millions of people, particularly from tribal areas. These are the women, especially, who are now joining the growing force of domestic workers in our cities.

Importance of Domestic Women Workers

The impact of globalization, the domestic work has become more important in every nation. From the standpoint of women workers, especially those in the third world, the 'anti-globalization' agenda makes no sense. It would simply deprive them of considerable employment opportunities as also the possibility of improving employment conditions through global solidarity and coordination. A much more sensible objective would be concerted action to shape the global order in accordance with women's agenda. This would in the first instance mean working for an extension of the reach of international law, and for democratic institutions of global governance.

The Domestic women work has enabled many women to enter the labour market and benefit from economic autonomy. However, this has not translated into gender equality. Worldwide, household responsibilities and unpaid care work continue to pose significant barriers to women's labour market participation. On many occasions, ILO has argued the need to change the idea that care-giving is a private domestic responsibility unique to women. A greater sense of social co-responsibility must be developed- first towards a redistribution of responsibilities



between households, the market and the state, that is a shift toward society as a whole assuming responsibility for the process of reproducing the labour force; and second, towards redistributing reproductive work/unpaid care work between men and women, in line with the change that has already taken place regarding productive (paid) work. In order to leave behind the assumption that women alone must balance productive work with family and care responsibilities, we must foster alternative models of maternity, paternity and masculinity. Hence, what is needed is a reconfiguration of the financing of 'care' from the current model that relies heavily on the households, the women and the domestic workers, to the state. This can be done through measures such as making available good quality full-day child care especially for the low income population and facilitating the development of effective policies to enable workers to meet demands of unpaid work.

Impact of Globalization on Domestic Women Workers

Significantly, the Domestic service has been global phenomenon since a long time. From the middle ages, servants were more common in northern Europe, despite the ending of feudalism and the growth of new industrial jobs. Industrialization and urbanization are said to encourage the growth of domestic-service work-force, because they produce a servant employing middle class on the demand side and a surplus of unskilled female labour force on the supply side. As far as international migration is concerned, definitions of domestic workers differ from country to country, which makes comparison sometimes difficult. Migrants without legal status and without recognized formal skills, which otherwise have limited chances to enter the labour market, can find work in domestic service sector. The higher the number of affluent middle and upper classes in the country, the more important is the domestic service sector. Historically the presence of women is more in this sector in almost all the nations.

In France in 1872 servants made up 6.5 per cent of the total population (5.2 per cent of men and 7.6 per cent of women) while in Belgium, in 1890, 11.5 per cent of the population were servants (13.7 per cent of women and 9.6 per cent are men), in Spain in 1860, (1.3 per cent of men and 1.5 per cent of women), and in Italy in 1861 (1.5 per cent of men and 2.9 per cent of women), in 1951, 1.8 million people worked in domestic service in Britain of whom 1.3 million were women (Reher 1998; 208). About 75 per cent black female labour force worked as domestic workers in 1920 in USA. In Canada, Australia and United States the servant's crisis of the late 19th century was met by encouraging the immigration of single women from Britain (Buckley 1977, Jackson, 1984). Industrialization and urbanization are said to encourage the growth of the domestic service work force, because they produce a servant employed by middle class and a surplus of unskilled female labour.

The majority of domestic workers in China and India are migrants from the rural areas. Domestic work is a socially accepted economic activity in Sri Lanka. There are no fixed working hours, regulated pay, termination benefits or health



insurance. Many domestic workers are underpaid and or treated in an inhuman, menial manner (Scaria, 2004). In Brazil a written contract is not obligatory between the worker and the employer. In Bolivia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Paraguay, Spain, Vietnam, domestic employment contract may be written or verbal. In United States a written contract is to be placed by employment agencies (Shashi Bala, 2010). In most countries women comprise vast majority of employees in the domestic service sector. Around 80 per cent domestic workers are women. Table 1.4A reveals that compared to males, larger percentage of female are working as domestic workers. Exceptionally in Tajikistan in 2004, a total of 2400 men were reported to be employed in private households while 1000 were women, in Egypt 71 per cent, in Algeria 55 per cent, in Tajikistan 70 per cent are men (Labotsta, 2008). The reasons might be that male servants have higher status than females, women employment is restricted to some specified tasks, males are feminized through profession, or jealousy of women not having younger women in the house and cultural reason i.e. Islam restricts women employment.

Table 1: Magnitude of Female Domestic Workers in Selected Countries

Country	Domestic workers as % of total employment	Year of data	Percentage of females to male domestic workers	Females domestic workers as % of females employment
Saudi Arabia	11.0	2008	63.51	49.7
Argentina	7.9	2006	NA	18.3
Uruguay	8.6	2007	90.95	18.5
South Africa	9.4	2007	75.96	16.7
Brazil	7.4	2007	93.78	16.4
Chile	6.1	2002	90.75	15.8
Costa Rica	6.0	2008	92.94	15.2
Panama	5.8	2008	88.88	13.8
Bolivia	6.1	2000	NA	13.2
Namibia	6.3	2004	82.98	11.9
Philippines	5.1	2008	244.5	11.0
EL Salvador	5.0	2006	NA	10.6
Mexico	4.2	2006	91.83	10.3
Mauritius	3.7	2008	88.48	9.5
Spain	3.7	2008	92.95	8.2
Malaysia	2.4	2008	88.37	5.9
Thailand	0.5	2008	89.13	1.0
Canada	0.4	2008	96.56	0.9
Vietnam	0.6	2004	59.60	0.7
India	1.48	2005	NA	NA

Source: LABORSTA (ILO).

On the other hand, the purely local and national struggles for unionization and protective labour legislation have been undermined by the global mobility of capital, but globalization has also created new ways of fighting for workers' rights. International trade union solidarity and coordinated campaigns, including the passing of new ILO Conventions, have in some cases succeeded in winning rights for workers engaged in local struggles. The ILO Core Conventions protecting



freedom of association, the right to organize and bargain collectively, and freedom from forced and bonded labour, the abolition of child labour, and freedom from discrimination were made mandatory in all member states of the ILO in 1998. The right to a safe and healthy workplace and freedom from sexual harassment can also be seen as basic human rights, although they are not included in the core conventions. Once informal labour has been formalized by registration, it would be possible to introduce additional measures to ensure a maximum amount of regularization of employment. For example, the Contract Labour Act in India makes it illegal to employ contract workers for permanent or perennial jobs; if instead of attempting to 'reform' this law into nothingness the government were to extend it to all forms of irregular employment (e.g., temporary, casual and seasonal as well as contract labour) and enforce it, this would regularize large sections of the labour force.

Role of ILO on Domestic Women Workers

There is no proper law enforcement to protect domestic women workers all around world under the international and domestic laws. From the standpoint of women workers, especially those in the third world, the 'anti-globalization' agenda makes no sense. It would simply deprive them of considerable employment opportunities as also the possibility of improving employment conditions through global solidarity and coordination. A much more sensible objective would be concerted action to shape the global order in accordance with women's agenda. This would in the first instance mean working for an extension of the reach of international law, and for democratic institutions of global governance.

In this connection, the recently adopted International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on domestic work, 2011, draws attention to a long-standing demand for decent work in the unorganized sector and, in particular, one which is associated with and overwhelmingly performed by women. The convention calls for ratifying states to use principles and guidelines provided by the convention to formulate legislative responses to the issue of decent work for domestic workers. In this context, it becomes necessary to address paid domestic work as a public policy concern. The Paid domestic work is commonly associated with low skills, low wages and often precarious employment has meant that domestic work is not associated with standard-setting as few norms operate in this sector. International conventions and domestic legislation often exclude these workers or they are excluded by implication. The push factors for domestic workers are rooted in economic insecurity and growing insecure employment. The demand for domestic work is rooted in slavery, colonialism and other forms of servitude. The rising demand for domestic workers in recent years is located in the increase of participation of women in the labour force, the ageing of societies, intensification of work, lack of adequate public care policies and the absence of work-family reconciliation policies.



The occupational based discrimination is one of the offences under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICEFRD). The Article 1 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination defines racial discrimination as "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life." In accordance with this definition, the terms "race," "racism" and "racial discrimination" may be used broadly to capture all forms of group-based discrimination including those based on formal racial distinctions, as well as those based on color, ethnicity, caste whether by descent and/or occupation, national origin, and ancestry. Because the nature of group-based discrimination varies widely, there is no uniform way to name or describe the women who are victimized by racial discrimination. In some contexts, the term "women of color" may be appropriate, in others, the term "ethnic women" or "minority women" may be more descriptive and in still others, none of these terms are appropriate. To capture all the ways in which some women are marginal relative to others within their societies, various terms may be used. These include the term "racialized women" and/or "marginalized women."

Thus, a problem or condition that disproportionately affects a subset of women may be framed solely as a women's problem. Aspects of the issue that render it an intersectional problem may be absorbed into a gender framework, and there may be no attempt to acknowledge the role that some other form of discrimination, such as racism, may have played in contributing to the circumstance. In this context, the full scope of problems that are simultaneously products of various forms of discrimination such as on the basis of race and gender escapes effective analysis. Consequently, efforts to remedy the condition or abuse in question are likely to be as incomplete as is the analysis upon which the intervention is grounded.

MEANING OF DOMESTIC WOMEN WORKERS

The word "domestic" can contain many different meanings to those who interpret it. Some may think of it as a positive word, one that denotes the respectable position of keeping a home well-kept and presentable, while others may think of it as a negative word, which implies the daily drudgery of household tasks that keep the performers of these tasks in a never-ending routine of work. Whatever "domestic" may mean to people, it more than often has a feminine connotation. "A woman's place is in the home" is a colloquial saying that was hegemonic in the collective consciousness of American society in the past and still persists in the present times. But what is the nature of domestic work? What happens to domestic work and the people who perform it when it is converted from a kind of work that is not measured by monetary earnings and completed by the women who live in the



private sphere of the home, to a service which is completed by a hired and paid worker?

With the historical roots of domestic work intertwined with that of the institutionalized slavery of different oppressed peoples (most notably people of African descent) and the societal slavery of women, the nature of the work itself carries many social and political meanings and ramifications for those who perform it as a means of livelihood. First and foremost, domestic work is a kind of work that is essential to the world that we live in. As Bridget Anderson asserts in her book, *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labor*: “domestic work is necessary work in that without it humanity would not continue. We need to accommodate the raising of children, the distribution and preparation of food, basic cleanliness and hygiene in order to survive individually and as a species...” While this kind of work is indeed a basic staple of society, there is not a uniform job description for domestic work. It could include the cleaning and upkeep of a home and it could include child care and cooking- or all of the above. “The problem of the definition of domestic work is not simply a theoretical one. It is experienced by domestic workers as a lack of job description with serious implications for their working conditions”

Anyway, the taking into account the roots of domestic work and the lack of a uniform job description in an industrialized society where most jobs have a concrete description; the paid domestic worker is placed in limbo between the (assumed separate) private and public spheres of life, identity, and work. In reality there is no separation between these two “spheres” of life. The private influences and shapes the public and vice-versa. Yet the societal assumption of the separation of these spheres allows certain types of people to be caught in between the two: “The domestic worker, like the prostitute, occupies the imaginary space between the two worlds, symbolically ordered and imagined in very different ways. Female employers on the other hand, have their movement between the public and the private facilitated by the domestic worker; she is the bridge between the domains. However, the blurring of the private and public spheres that occurs with domestic work leads to the lack of the worker’s control over working conditions. This is true for many workers within industrialized, capitalist society. Yet, domestic workers experience an amplified lack of control. This work is done within the home, which more times than not, can be an isolating place and a place where the tasks are endless. These factors help amplify her lack of control over her work. Domestic workers that “live-in” with their employers have even less control over their living quarters or their workday, since both of these conditions are dictated by the employer. There is no federal legal protection for domestic workers, and consistently throughout history, domestic workers have been left out of protective labor legislation: “Servants worked both longer days and weeks compared to other working women. Often when legislation limited the workday for women, it specifically excluded domestic servants...their exclusion from legislation meant that domestics were still working a seven-day week when other working women had



their week limited to five and one half days. Throughout the nineteenth century most servants continued to work at least a ten hour day; the full working day averaged between ten to twelve hours”

The domestic worker is not covered under the National Labor Relations Act of 1925 (legalizing the right for workers to organize unions, and collectively bargain with employers) nor under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which “establishes minimum wage, overtime pay, recordkeeping, and youth employment standards affecting employees in the private sector and in Federal, State, and local governments”. Therefore, the rights that these pieces of legislation guarantee workers do not apply to domestic workers. The lack of formal infrastructure by which a domestic worker can take some control over her work is one factor that reproduces the oppressive living and working situations that most domestic workers experience.

In addition to the above factors that comprise the nature of domestic work, there is a strong underlying notion that this kind of work is “women’s work”, and, in congruence with the dominant social views of patriarchal society, these terms lead to the idea that domestic work is inherently demeaning. The notions of class, race, and gender divisions also play a large role in the social status of a domestic worker. The social norms of what characteristics a “refined lady” was and is supposed to exhibit, inherently contradict the very nature of domestic work. A domestic worker does manual labor, she lifts, she scrubs and she cleans and washes dirtied household items. If a woman is supposed to be “pure” and “pristine” in a patriarchal society, the very nature of domestic work is in divergence with this image: “...workers proved their inferiority by their physicality and dirt, while female employers proved their superiority by their femininity, daintiness and managerial skills. Male employers proved their superiority by never having to consider domestic drudgery, while enjoying the home as a refuge, a well-deserved rest from the stresses and strains of productive work.

Finally, the lack of value and respect in regard to domestic work is reproduced from almost every realm of society. Even many women who work as domestics do not see the value in their work: “Over and over again women, native and foreign-born, expressed their dislike of servant life. ‘ Society has no use for us, and we object to being patronized. If I could only make people understand that it is not being a servant that is hard, but being treated as an inferior’. Not only were the words ‘service’ and ‘servant’ disliked, they were hateful because the really unpleasant facet about domestic service was how it damaged self-respect.” The brief exploration of the above societal factors and implications that pertain to hired domestic work make it logical to come to the conclusion that the women who make a living as domestic workers work and live under oppressive conditions that are perpetuated by a mixture of dominant societal views and practices that concern (but are not limited to): gender, race, class, labor, and place. With this being one of the conclusions that can be reached from the investigation of the realm of domestic



work, the question of how these workers can and have organized to empower themselves arises. In an attempt to answer this question, we must first begin to examine the attempts to organize domestic workers through a historical lens.

Summing Up:

Active participation of NGOs and Central trade Unions should be encouraged for the management of such welfare schemes that are so made available to the workers. To form a tripartite group to review existing schemes, in order to discuss scope and coverage of various schemes, to make suggestions for extending schemes to all employees in organized and unorganized sector. This group should also consider financing and administration of schemes. This tripartite group should consider suggestions for removing existing shortcomings in various schemes and to curb corruption and remove administrative inefficiency causing delays and harassment to beneficiaries.

Due to increasing unemployment it is necessary to formulate unemployment insurance scheme. In the absence of such scheme social ill effects such as frustration amongst youth, increase in criminal activities, social unrest etc. is bound to rise. The unemployment insurance scheme can mitigate ill effects to some extent. Adequate Hazard Risk Cover Insurance Schemes should be made available to these domestic workers. Social security to self-employed and employees in unorganized sector be considered. Health Care Security Schemes should be there for these workers and the same should be provided by the local self-government/State govt. ideally even a single worker should be provided with social security. An integrated or comprehensive scheme in social security is desirable.

The problems of Domestic Women Workers are enormous and hence needs immediate attention. Not only the Government, but also the entire society through NGOs, Trade Unions, and such others are required to take initiatives and suo motto act in the search of solutions to alleviate the problems through appropriate forums. The modalities to evolve workable solutions to all the issues can best be resolved through a Round Table Conference involving all socio-economic interests. International Labour Office at Geneva and its regional and sub-regional offices in Asia and the Pacific who are supporting the efforts of their constituents in a number of ways and working with governments, worker and employer organizations in Asia to prepare for the 2010 ILC discussion on Decent Work for Domestic Workers. The discussion could lead to the creation of an international instrument to extend social protection to domestic workers (such as a new ILO Convention or Recommendation). In preparation for these discussions, the ILO has been working with its constituents in twelve countries across Asia examining the various aspects inherent to domestic work, such as migration, gender aspects and stereotyping, workplace and societal discrimination, lack of social protection, isolation and its impediment in the right to organize.



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