

An Analysis of Social Conditions of Migrant Female Domestic Workers in Delhi

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ABSTRACT

The people from rural areas get attracted due to the wages and conditions of work, but due to limited opportunities in the Formal sector, it is the informal sector that absorbs them. Hence, it is necessary to make this vulnerable section much stronger and which will then lead to the fulfilment of the target of "inclusive growth" in the country. India is a developing country that has vast informal workers in its total labourforce. The large presence of the informal labourforce makes them vulnerable as well due to their sizable presence, and it also leaves them with meager wages and other job protection measures. The progress and development of any country can be decided after knowing the status and condition of its vulnerable sections and women in society¹. The informal sector is not only vulnerable in regard to wages and jobs, but it is also very much fluctuating in terms of unemployment.

Keywords: Female Domestic Workers, Labourforce, Unemployment, Wages, Informal Workers.

Introduction

Women undertaking various paid jobs that are viewed as part of the umbrella term "domestic work" form an important section of the urban society. "Domestic work" contains different categories of work such as cleaning, washing clothes, cooking, child and elderly care. The sector draws migrants from various parts of the country, rendering services in households belonging to various income categories. Women belonging to relatively underdeveloped states- Jharkhand, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh are drawn to this sector. Among such migrants, many belong to tribal belts. These migrant women and their families face a host of challenges in Delhi. While finding and sustaining employment in a sector which is yet to be brought under formal regulations is an immediate challenge that migrant women and their families face, there are several other hardships associated with relocation to a new city: adequate living space, availability of basic amenities such as water, health facilities, sanitation and schooling opportunities for children. The process of migration and initiation into domestic work, as well as finding accommodation and accessing basic amenities, is facilitated through existing social networks. For Christian women from tribal belts, the Church forms an important means of accessing such networks.

The study attempts to build a brief profile of tribal domestic workers who have migrated to Delhi, looking into the key reasons for migration and exploring why and how they ended up working as domestic workers. It also attempts to explore whether the workers were aware of the nature of work that they would be required to perform prior to migrating.

The incomes earned through domestic work, a sector that is yet to receive recognition as "work", become a key influence on the socio-economic condition that the workers and their families can access. The wages earned through domestic work are unregulated and are not covered under minimum wage

¹Vimala.M. "Socio Economic Status of Domestic Women Servants – A Case Study of Thrissur Corporation." Submitted to Kerla Research Programme on Local Level Development, CDS, Thiruvananthapuram

laws. In the absence of active unionization and collective bargaining, the setting of wages and their adequacy is an intriguing line of inquiry. While a complete analysis of the wage formation process is beyond the scope of this study, we seek to highlight the important factors that influence wages and comment on their possible roles. The conditions of work at the employer's house, where the workers spend a significant part of every working day, form a crucial component of the migrant workers' lives in Delhi. The study looks into the paid leaves, breaks for meals/snacks, and additional financial help in the form of small loans/borrowings provided by the employers. The living conditions of the workers are influenced not just by their wages, but by their household income.

The present paper adopts a two-pronged approach for analysis. Individual experiences of migrant workers are studied and combined with the condition of their households. Looking at both the individual workers and the households as units of analysis enables a greater understanding of their lives. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 deals with a survey of the related literature available. Data source and research methodology are discussed under section 3 of the paper. Descriptive analysis and Research findings are the subject matter that are to be considered under section 4. Finally, section 5 concludes the findings of the paper.

Review of the Literature

In this study, we have surveyed the migrated domestic workers, and it also includes women labourers. The non-availability of work or employment forces the rural population to come into big cities in search of employment (Dar and Rani, 2013). And it led to an increase in their supply to big cities and ultimately left them with a low level of wages and other unfavorable conditions. The major goal of the modern-day welfare government is to improve the conditions of living of its people and deliver the fruits of the growth to the last person in the economy. Any attempt to identify the relevant anti-poverty policies will have to be based on the proper understanding of the nature of the economy and labour market processes as a whole (Mehta, 1985). The majority of the people have to depend on informal employment earnings for their livelihood, and hence, proper attention must be paid for leveraging the condition of these people, which will lead to the wholesome development of the country. People from the rural areas come to urban areas in search of better livelihoods. It is the urban sector wages and living conditions that attract the migrant workers towards cities, but it is the informal Sector which holds them in urban areas (Papola, 1980). It is mainly because urban formal sectors, which are capital and skill-intensive in nature, have not provided employment opportunities to the mass of migrant people. The unprotected (Informal) sector in cities performs as a labour market clearing function in situations in which migration-fed supply exceeds demand in Protected (Formal) sector activities (Harberger, 1971). But, the views regarding treating the Informal Sector as temporary employment base were rejected by the ILO study of employment in Kenya, which emphasises that informal sector employment plays a great role in the development of Kenya's economy and provides earning opportunities for a large number of people (1972). Sethuraman (1981) rejected this view of temporary job situation also and emphasized that the Informal Sector provides a permanent source of income and employment.

The productivity of labour, i.e., providing productive employment, not only increases the growth rate of the economy but also reduces the poverty level of the country. The productive employment provides the key linkage between economic development and poverty reduction (ILO, 2012). In any economy, the work created should be: (a) decent, and (b) productive. Increasing labour productivity almost necessitates a shift of employment from low-productivity agriculture to the secondary and tertiary sectors, and from the low-productivity unorganised to the organised sectors. There has been a shift in both types of employment (from agriculture to non-agriculture and from the unorganized to organized sectors within non-agriculture) in terms of both the absolute level and the percentage share of non-agricultural employment in the 2000s. Most of the shift of labour in both types of employment has been due to a rise in informal employment, that is, employment without any social protection.

There have been a number of studies on the conditions of domestic workers. Domestic work is one of the oldest and most important occupations for millions of women around the world. It is rooted in the global history of slavery, colonialism, and other forms of servitude. Today, domestic workers make up a large portion of the workforce, especially in developing countries, and their number has been increasing, even in the industrialized world. ILO's report (2010), "Decent Work for Domestic Workers," outlined arguments about how domestic work is undervalued and poorly regulated, and many domestic workers remain overworked, underpaid, and unprotected. Such arguments relate domestic work and domestic workers to historically prevalent capitalist/caste/class/racial discrimination, including patriarchal dominance.

In Neetha N. (2004), migration of women into domestic work is viewed against the traditional societal norm of migration due to marriage. Domestic workers often migrate due to economic conditions rather than post-marriage relocation. The survey supports this analysis, as most of the respondents admitted to migrating in search of work. Further, the role of networking in seeking employment opportunities and finding accommodation is also confirmed by our findings. Women are found to be contributing in most cases, at least half of the household incomes, thereby asserting their economic role as crucial for the households.

Data and Research Methodology

The study relies on a primary survey of migrant part-time domestic workers in Delhi. The survey was facilitated by *Chetanayala* and the *Domestic Workers Forum*. The *Domestic Workers Forum* is actively engaged in advocacy of the rights of domestic workers. Given the significant proportion of Christians in the tribal belts of the countries, Churches serve as an important point of access for the *Domestic Workers Forum* for reaching out to Christian tribal women who migrate to Delhi in search of work. The survey is focused on this specific category of domestic workers.

The *Domestic Workers Forum* operates in 6 zones in Delhi-NCR. South and South West regions have had the presence of the forum for over four years, enabling them to build a strong database of the workers in the area. From the list of colonies (employers) classified as relatively high and middle income provided by the forum, we decided to survey the following areas:

- Defence Colony/Kotla Mubarakpur: Defence Colony in South Delhi is categorized as "B" according to MCD's income categorization (A-G). Kotla Mubarakpur is located nearby and is categorized as "E" by MCD. Part-time domestic workers typically live in Kotla Mubarakpur and work at the houses in Defence Colony. St. Luke's Church in Defence Colony serves as a meeting point for the workers and the forum, with several workers seeking leave from work on Sundays to attend mass and to meet other domestic workers at the Church. Out of a total of 50 part-time domestic workers in contact with the forum, we were able to interview 21. While we were able to meet some of the workers in the church itself, we visited Kotla Mubarakpur to interview more workers and to observe the living conditions of the workers.
- Lado Sarai: Lado Sarai is categorized as "F" by MCD. The workers residing their work in the nearby areas, such as the Press Enclave and in better-off households in Lado Sarai itself. Press Enclave is categorized as "C" by MCD, and this is treated as the upper bar on the income classification of the employers of the workers. On being asked where they went for work/address of the employers, the workers gave vague responses such as "nearby", "across the street", and several employers were within Lado Sarai itself. The upper bar has been adopted to ensure that colonies do not get miscategorized into a lower income group, thereby confounding the analysis. We have checked that near Lado Sarai, there is no colony which is categorized above "C." For analysis, we have therefore taken "C" as the representative colony classification of employers for the workers in this area. The forum is engaged with 15 workers in Lado Sarai, out of which we were able to interview 8.
- Mahipalpur: The forum has contact with 30 workers in Mahipalpur, out of which we managed to interview 18. The income category bar of "C" is used for employers of workers from this area too, as there is no colony classified higher than C in this ward, the highest being Vasant Kunj (C).

The analysis of the data collected by the survey has been conducted using simple statistical tools such as tests of significance and simple averages. The analysis has been supplemented by representative charts wherever possible. The qualitative insights gained by us during the process of conducting the field visits have been utilized to inform and contextualize the analysis, and this has played an important role in shaping a deeper understanding of the initial questions.

Descriptive Findings and Research Analysis

- **Migrant Tribal Domestic Workers: A Profile**

Our study focuses on the living conditions of female domestic workers in Delhi, who have migrated from tribal regions of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, and Uttar Pradesh. In addition, all females from the tribal community were Christians. The study tries to analyze the household and economic profile of such workers.

As far as migration status is concerned, workers in our sample are residing in Delhi for a total duration of just 1 year to almost 35 years. However, 70 percent have been residing in Delhi for more than a decade. Further, it has been found that a large section of poor girls and women migrate from the tribal regions of Jharkhand due to poor socioeconomic status. In our study, 74 percent of the migrant domestic workers were from the state of Jharkhand.

The above fact that monetary requirement is the main reason for coming to Delhi can further be supported by the fact that almost 81 percent of them claimed that they had migrated to Delhi for better work opportunities. Also, since currently all of them are in the age group of more than 25 years, it can be interpreted that they migrated to Delhi for work opportunities at a very early age. In addition, 83 percent said that they had come to Delhi in the company of their family members or along with some known person from their hometown.

Post their migration to Delhi, all our respondents claimed that they started working as domestic workers because, given their migrant status, lack of education and skills, as well as difficulty of communicating in Hindi, this was the most easily available work opportunity. Educational status of the migrant workers indicated that in the case of 55 percent of the workers highest level of education was just up to the primary level, and in the interview, most of them said that they had to drop out of their schools at a very early level due to monetary constraints.

However, during their initial years of migration, they could find employment with just one or two employers and due to a lack of knowledge and bargaining power, they were paid very less. Some of them worked for 2 to 4 hours a day for just 300 rupees a month. Hence, almost 70 percent of them discontinued working with their initial employers within two years of their employment.

- **Domestic Workers at the Workplace**

At the outset, an interesting line of inquiry is whether the economic status of employers influences wages earned by the domestic workers. The classification of colonies provided by MCD is used as a proxy indicator of the employer's economic status. The data reveal that the average wage of workers as well as their household incomes in B and C category colonies do not differ significantly ($t=0.8$).

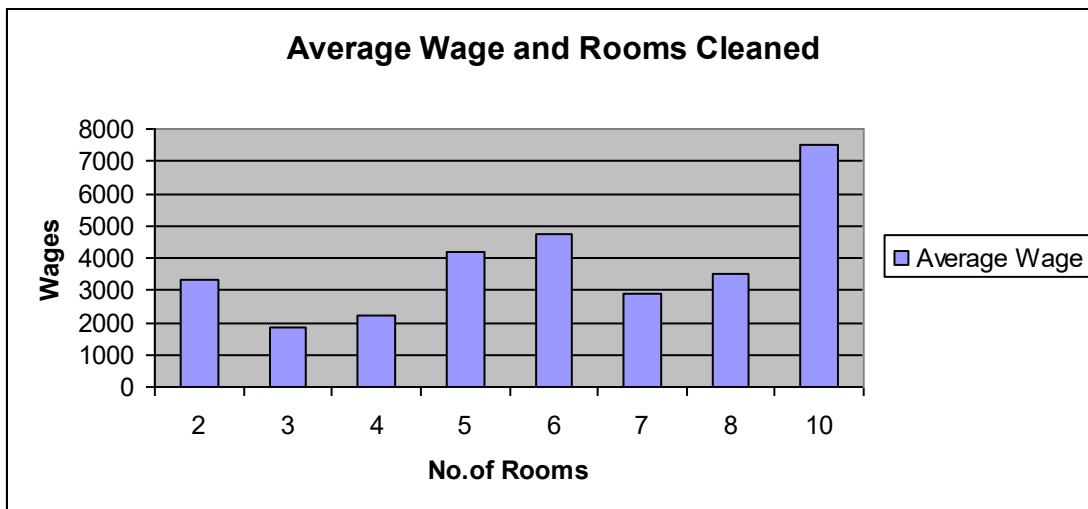
Out of 34 workers who reported that they had been doing the same job since they had arrived in Delhi, we inquired if their years of experience could impact the wages that they earn. From the data, wages do not appear to be impacted by the years of experience that the workers may have. The survey highlights the possibility of stagnation in wages over the years. Given the limitations of the sample size, it cannot be conclusively asserted that such a trend exists, but given the informal wage bargaining system in place, with no clear sources of benefits for those who have been engaged in the job for several years, such a stagnation is a possibility which is supported by the survey's findings. During our field work, several middle-aged domestic workers remarked that they have been working in some households for several years, but pay revisions in such households are problematic as they are treated as "part of the family."



Source: Authors' Calculation

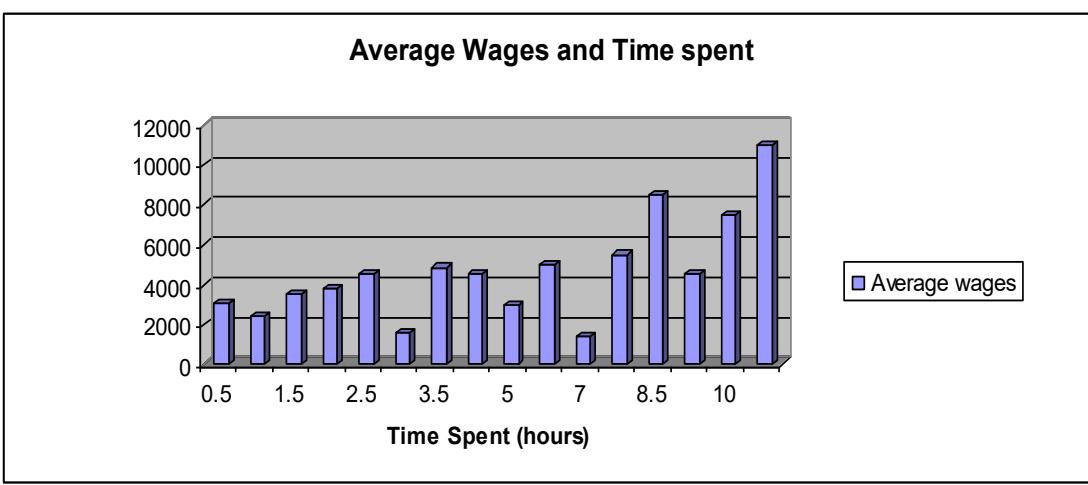
The above trend highlights the lack of appropriate labour contracts in the sector, which results in workers enjoying no benefits from experience.

Most of the workers perform a bouquet of tasks in different households. Cleaning, which includes sweeping the floors of the rooms, is a popular task. However, the same worker is often paid a different wage for the same task in different households. It is interesting to note that although the number of rooms in an employer's house may directly impact the time and effort expended by a worker in cleaning, there is no clear relation between the number of rooms and wages paid for cleaning.



Source: Authors' Calculation

Wages received appear to be linked to the time spent by the worker in the household. Households that spend more time appear to pay them more. While it is obvious that greater time may be spent due to a greater number of tasks, spending beyond 4 hours in a single household point towards other possible reasons, as cleaning, washing utensils, clothes, and cooking were not reported as taking more than 4 hours. A possible explanation for this is the informal nature of the work contract, wherein workers are often required by the employers to simply be present in case of any work, or required to do small tasks such as helping in cutting vegetables, running minor errands, serving guests, etc. On average, a worker spends half an hour more (3 hours) at work if an employer resides in a "B" colony as compared to an employer residing in a "C" colony (2.5 hours). This difference is not statistically significant.



Source: Authors' Calculation

Another interesting observation that we were able to make is that while 6 of the workers who were employed in "C" colonies worked in 4 or more households, the corresponding number for workers employed in "B" colonies is just 1. This further supports our assertion that in "B" colonies, workers may be required to spend more time in each household that they work in and perform various small tasks.

Workers on average receive 2.2 days of paid leave per month. This number does not differ significantly when disaggregated for workers employed in colonies categorized as B and C. Several workers stated that leaves were negotiable, and that they get off for attending mass at the local church.

29 out of the 47 workers responded that they had not received any in-kind payments in addition to wages. The few who did have received clothes on festivals and household items such as old refrigerators, washing machines, pressure cookers, etc. Apart from this, 30 out of the 47 workers were regularly offered meals or tea/snacks by the employers. Only 10 of the interviewed workers responded that they had borrowed or could expect to borrow money from their employers in times of need. The maximum amount of such a borrowing that any of them had availed in the past was Rs. 15000.

Concluding Remarks

The study has helped us gain some understanding about the lives of migrant domestic workers. Most of the women appear to be migrating for work, either with the help of family members or acquaintances from their hometowns. The possibility of earning better employment opportunities draws them to the city. Upon arrival in the city, they are not aware of the nature of the job that they will be taking up. It is worth noting that for most of the women covered in the survey, domestic work is the only paid work they have ever taken up. In the largely unregulated sector, there are no clear reasons for women to continue working as domestic workers year after year, as work experience does not appear to lead them to higher wages. They appear to continue working due to a lack of other opportunities, and in some cases, due to the scope of flexibility that part-time domestic work entails. The women tend to take a break from work for pregnancy, and in several cases, they work for a lesser number of hours in order to be able to look after their young children up to 2-3 years. Most of the women also reported that they send their young children to anganwadicentres and private pre-nursery schools. This may be indicative of the need to get back to work after pregnancy, rather than awareness about the requirement for pre-school education.

At the workplace, women have to bargain for raises and for leaves. There is no evidence of growth in wages with experience. This paints a rather somber picture wherein these women appear to be continuously working for stagnant wages with little scope for growth. The lack of effective unionization of domestic workers is apparent in their inability to earn any kind of fixed wages for different tasks from different employers. Organizations such as the *Domestic Workers Forum* are working to educate and organize the workers, but much greater and concerted efforts at a larger scale may be required to bring about any element of regularization in wages. This points towards the need for implementing a system of clearly specified contracts with provisions for wage increments, leave policy, and clearly defined tasks that the worker shall undertake.

Another interesting observation is that the education of children figured as a prominent reason for staying in the city. Although the limitations of the survey do not allow us to conclude that children's education is an important factor, the emphasis on education is highlighted by the observation that over 90% of the respondents with children of school-going age send their children to tuition classes after school. In such a situation, an appropriate social security net designed to suit the specific needs of such migrant workers may go a long way in helping them lead dignified lives and reduce the vulnerabilities that they face.

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