

Issues of Domestic workers in India

Under the ILO Convention 189, a domestic worker is “any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship”.

A domestic worker may work on full-time or part-time basis; may be employed by a single household or by multiple employers; may be residing in the household of the employer (live-in worker) or may be living in his or her own residence (live-out). A domestic worker may be working in a country of which she/he is not a national.

Nearly 90% of domestic workers in India are women or children (especially girls), ranging from ages 12 to 75 and it is estimated that 25% among them are below the age of 14. The majority of domestic workers are illiterate. They are engaged in tasks such as cooking, washing, and cleaning, which are traditionally seen as women’s work and considered subservient in nature. In India, the stigma linked to domestic work is heightened by the caste system, since tasks such as cleaning and sweeping are associated with the people belonging to the ‘so-called’ low castes. Domestic workers are commonly referred to as ‘servants’ and ‘maids’ which has resulted in their feelings of insecurity and inferiority. This has further added to the undignified status awarded to the services provided by them.

Domestic Workers are highly exploited and denied just wages and humane working conditions. They are paid well below the minimum wages for unskilled or semi-skilled workers. The vast majority of live-in domestic workers work a minimum of 15 hours a day, seven days a week. Part-time workers often work in 3-4 different houses for nearly 8-10 hours every day. The working hours of domestic workers can go from 8 to over 18 hours a day. Wages, leave facilities, medical benefits, and rest time are at the employer’s mercy. Moreover, they are often victims of suspicion. If anything is missing in the house, they are the first to be accused with threats, physical violence, police interrogation, conviction, and even dismissal. A great number of live-in domestic workers are recruited from rural or tribal areas. They have to adapt to an alien environment, culture, and language. Domestic Workers experience a tremendous sense of loneliness because of the solitary nature of the work. This

loneliness is compounded by the fact that most have no or very little time off and they are unable to communicate with distant friends and relatives. Often they are not allowed to use the telephone and are prohibited from socializing with friends and relatives who are living and working in the same city.

Domestic workers are comprised of three main groups

- Live-in domestic workers
- Part-time / Live-out domestic worker
- Migrant Domestic Workers
 - Inter-state domestic workers
 - Overseas domestic workers

Live-in Domestic workers

Live-in domestic workers reside at the place of employment. They are engaged in all domestic work ranging from housekeeping, washing clothes, utensils, cooking and even engaged in baby, children or elderly care. They depend on their employers for basic needs such as food and shelter. Most live-in domestic workers are women who have migrated or have been trafficked from villages to cities in search of employment. They are to large extent children, unmarried and sometimes married young girls, separated or widowed women.

Part-time Domestic Workers

Part-time domestic workers are generally locals or migrants in the city where they are employed. They mostly live in slums and work in the houses of multiple employers to earn their livelihood. They are called part-timers not because they do only part time work but because they do not stay with the employer and are not expected to be on call 24 hours a day. They either work all day for one employer or repeatedly perform specific tasks like washing clothes, dishes, or cooking for a number of employers. Part-timers are less

dependent on their employers than full time workers. They live with their families and run their homes, as well as those of their employers. However, they are less dependent on their employers for their basic needs and are characterized with a greater degree of independence than the live-in domestic workers.

Migrant Domestic workers

Many women migrate from their villages to work as domestic workers. This migration takes two forms:

- Inter-state Domestic Workers
- Overseas Domestic Workers

Whether the domestic worker remains in India or travels to the Middle East or Southeast Asia, she finds herself in a foreign environment, away from her family and adjusting to new languages, food, and cultures. Migrants are typically live-in domestic workers and are thus most vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, excessively long working hours, and deprivation. Many of them are from tribal regions and the traditional discrimination they face as women and as live in domestic workers is compounded by their ethnicity. Despite these problems, poor women are forced to migrate to cities and foreign countries in order to supplement their families' meager incomes.

Migration within India

Migration from rural areas to big cities typically occurs due to debt bondage, poverty, sudden death in the family, rural and male unemployment. The glamour of city life acts as a further "pull" factor inducing young girls and women to migrate. Working in cities is seen as a solution to poverty and villagers are unaware of the exploitative working conditions and poor remuneration that the vast majority of domestic workers have to endure. Additionally, a large number of domestic workers come from areas, which have been subjected to natural disasters and man-made crisis situations (such as insurgency) and as such are from displaced communities.

Increasingly, “trafficking agencies” have become a very significant factor in encouraging internal migration. In the arena of domestic work, organised trafficking is taking place as villagers living in the cities are returning to their native places to bring more women, girls and children into this labour sector. Once the girls arrive in the cities, their wages are typically locked or they go unpaid in order to pay the traffickers a fee for securing employment.

Migration Outside of India

There is an increased demand from richer industrialized countries for cheap, menial and domestic labour. Migrants from poorer, less developed countries such as India can jump to this opportunity as it does not require any high skills or education. Thousands of Indian women travel to countries in the Middle East, South East Asia, and sometimes Europe and North America in search of jobs paying higher wages. However, these women earn the lowest salary for a foreign worker, despite the fact that they may be earning more than they would in India for the same job.

Many women travel abroad to send money back home in an effort to improve their quality of life in India. However, in travelling abroad, they become vulnerable to corrupt recruitment practices, lack of work contracts, withheld salaries, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse at the workplace and in many cases, their travel documents are withheld and they are prevented from returning home.

In India, the procedure for migrating abroad for work is unregulated. The Indian government has not implemented a pre-migration program aimed at educating migrants of their rights. In order to travel abroad, migrants are forced to borrow large sums of money, often with exorbitant interest rates, to pay fees to brokers.

In many cases, the migrants, who are often illiterate and naïve to the potential risks of entrusting large sums of money with strangers, are the victims of scams of the fly-by-night brokers. These con artists do not secure the promised job abroad, give them false tickets, or do not secure the appropriate paperwork

so that the women can legally work as domestic workers. Thus, many women find themselves in a foreign country without the necessary papers. They are especially vulnerable to not being paid the promised salary and being held in conditions of slavery without the ability to complain to the police. In many cases, the employer holds on to the domestic worker's passport, preventing her from leaving or contacting the Indian embassy to file complaints.