



Challenges and Issues of Paid Domestic Workers in Kanyakumari District, Tamilnadu

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Abstract

Domestic workers constitute one of the largest segments of unorganized workers in India and it is one job where men are out numbered by women. Domestic workers lack respect and recognition from their employers and are mostly underpaid, prevailing in a state of dependency. This paper, based on a qualitative study, aims to find out the nature of work and work related problems of women domestic workers, and to uncover the factors which contribute to their entry into paid domestic work. Samples are selected from the domestic workers in Kanyakumari District. The data was collected through in- depth interviews and analyzed using interpretive methods. Eight major themes, namely, working hours, place of employment, type of work performed by the domestic workers in employer's home, the employee and employer support, emerged in this study to explain the nature of work, and work related problems of paid women domestic workers. The domestic workers' perceptions about factors that contribute to their entry into paid domestic work are discussed under socio-economic backwardness and educational status. The findings of the study will help to identify vulnerability in paid domestic work and frame a strategy for organizing and globalizing domestic workers in the context of the International Labour Organisation's latest efforts in promoting decent work for domestic workers.

Keywords: Unorganized sector, domestic workers, work related problems, kanyakumari

Introduction

In the last few decades the participation of women in paid work has increased. In developing countries women workers engage more in the unorganized sector rather than in the organized sector. A recent study indicates that more than 90 per cent of the working women in India are engaged as wage labourers in the

Challenges and Issues of Paid Domestic Workers in Kanyakumari District, Tamilnadu

unorganized sector, many of them belonging to the economically poor, socially backward and oppressed sections of the society. Among the various unorganized sectors, domestic work is one of the rapidly growing segments in India, where the female participation is generally higher compared to their male counterparts, and is often poorly regulated and unprotected. Most domestic workers are from the marginalized sections of society and a large number of them are migrant workers. The domestic workers range from full-time to part-time workers, skilled and unskilled workers. The present study is an attempt to explore the nature of work and work related problems of domestic workers and to identify the factors that contribute to the entry of large number of women in domestic work.

Domestic work and Domestic workers

The ILO Convention No .189 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, and driving for the family. The Convention 189 of ILO defines the domestic worker as, “any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship” .The Draft National Policy on Domestic Workers as recommended by the Taskforce on Domestic Workers provides a definition of a domestic worker as: “For the purpose of this policy, the “domestic worker” means, a person who is employed for remuneration whether in cash or kind, in any household through any agency or directly, either on a temporary or permanent, part time or full time basis to do the household work, but does not include any member of the family of an employer:

Types of domestic workers, based on the hours of work and nature of employment relationship:

The domestic workers can be;

- a) Part-time worker i.e. worker who works for one or more employers for a specified number of hours per day or performs specific tasks for each of the multiple employers every day.
- b) Full-time worker i.e. worker who works for a single employer every day for a specified number of hours (normal full day work) and who returns back to her/his home every day after work.
- c) Live-in worker i.e. worker who works full time for a single employer and also stay on the premises of the employer or in a dwelling provided by the employer (which is close or next to the house of the employer) and does not return back to her/his home every day after work.”

Nature of work

Paid domestic work is often considered an undervalued profession, not only by the employers, but also by the domestic workers themselves. In a society dominated by patriarchal values, domestic work is always identified with women, reinforcing the worldview that paid domestic work is simply an extension of what women are already doing in their homes but in somebody else's premises. Even though the domestic workers are contributing enormously to the global economy, their work is often unorganized, overworked, underpaid, and abused.

Working Conditions

No formal contracts ensuring an employer- employee relationship, lack of organization, poor bargaining power, no legislative protection, and inadequate welfare measures with no provision for weekly holidays, maternity leave and health benefits are some of the key issues that need to be addressed. This lack of regulation has led to countless violations of domestic workers' rights, including working hours ranging between 8 and 18 hours and the absence of any job security. Domestic workers invariably represent the more marginalized communities in society. Prejudice and bias related to social status is reflected very strongly at the workplace for many domestic workers. Female domestic workers, especially those who live in their employer's home, are vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Factors contributing to Paid Domestic work

There are many factors which contribute to increase in the number of women domestic workers in our society. John (2013) suggests that the shift from agrarian society to one that is service-based, and the increase in middle class society, have an impact on the increase in the number of domestic workers. Further more the participation of more educated women in employment, created opportunities for unskilled women to fill the vacuum they created in their homes by performing household tasks.

Adequate literature is not available on domestic workers, especially in the Indian context. There is a dearth of studies in Kanyakumari on this topic. Most of the available studies are quantitative in nature and often fail to capture the real experiences of domestic workers. The authentic lives of paid domestic workers in their place of employment and the circumstances which cause the entry of thousands of women into this job need to be scientifically investigated for any interventions and efforts to mainstream this vulnerable sector.

Challenges and Issues of Paid Domestic Workers in Kanyakumari District, Tamilnadu

Wages

Wages for the domestic workers are determined by factors such as tasks performed, hours of work, their social status, skills (or the lack of it), the need for flexibility and other labour market conditions. There are on-going debates over the norms for setting wages. These debates include several tricky issues such as whether the wage ought to be time rated or piece rated, in kind, hourly or weekly, part-time or full time, based on house size or persons per household, over time; adjusted for boarding, include medical care and other necessities and multiplicity of employers.

Objectives of the study

- To find out the nature and work related problems of domestic workers
- To find out the contributing factors to joining in paid domestic work

Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative study to explore the nature of work and work related problems of paid domestic workers in Kanyakumari District. The samples are selected from the domestic workers 'in Kanyakumari District. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. The first hand information has been collected from the sample respondents with the help of an interview schedule prepared and pre-tested for its suitability through a pilot study. 100 domestic workers were selected by using convenient sampling method. In total, 96 domestic workers took part in the current study. The collected data was analysed using the interpretive approach. Data on working hours, place of employment, type of work performed by the domestic workers, the employee and employer relationship, problems at work place, income, occupational health, and family support were obtained to explain the nature of work and work related problems of paid women domestic workers.

Findings of the study

Socio-Demographic Profile of Domestic Workers

The socio - demographic profiles of domestic workers are presented in Table 1

Table 1
Socio-Demographic Profile of Domestic workers

Factors	No.of domestic Workers
Age in Years	
18-39	34
40-59	46
60and above	16
Education	
Illiterate	1
Primary	19
Secondary	64
Higher Secondary	12
Marital Status	
Unmarried	2
Married	54
Widowed	24
Separated	16
Year of Experience in Years	
0-5	21
6-10	53
11 and above	22

Working Hours:

Table 2

Working Hours	Number of Paid Domestic Workers
1.5 hours to 3 hours (Part time Workers)	64
1 hour to 8 hours (Full time Workers)	32

The two categories of domestic workers which took part in the study were part-time and full-time. The data collected suggested that part-time workers worked for 3-4 homes every day, and spent one and half to three hours in each home. Time spent in a particular home depends upon the duties to be performed and wages paid. Full-time domestic workers worked from morning to evening in a home. Both part-and full-time workers worked for eight hours or more a day. In Most of the cases, they were not able to keep to the allocated time because of last minute tasks assigned to them which made it impossible for them to reach their other worksites in time.

Challenges and Issues of Paid Domestic Workers in Kanyakumari
District, Tamilnadu

Place of Employment

Table 3

Place of Employment	Number of Paid Domestic Workers
Residential homes and flats	58
Offices	12
Commercial establishments	26

The Majority of domestic workers were working in residential homes and flats. Twelve of them were working in offices or some from of commercial establishment .For those working in employers' homes or flats, there was no time or place to rest. For those who work in offices there is some place to rest, yet they cannot do so as their supervisors assign them more tasks or they must rush to other offices. It is concluded that the domestic workers working in offices or commercial establishments were facing more challenging tasks and hardships because the supervisor's assigns the work and they want to finish a assigned job with in a particular time limit.

Type of Work Performed by Domestic Workers

Table 4

Type of Work	Number of Paid Domestic Workers
Clean utensils, wash clothes and sweep	66
Clean ceiling fan, roof and other things	13
Helping related to cooking	09
Cooking	08

The majority (68.75%) of domestic workers believed they had to clean utensils, wash clothes and sweep , twenty one domestic worker said that they must even clean the ceiling fan and roof, tasks which are usually performed by men. Nine domestic workers must help the employers in kitchen by cutting vegetables, Cleaning fish and meat, and grinding. But usually they were not allowed to cook. Very few domestic workers suggested that they engaged in cooking. The sincerity and truthfulness of domestic workers play an important role in assigning the type of work and it is the issue and challenges for them to face. The person who is assigning the work having lack of confident about the domestic workers

The Employee and Employer Relationship

The Relationship between the employee and employer is discussed under three sub-themes: relationship, grievance redressal and availing the rights of domestic workers.

Relationship

Table 5

Relationship	Number of Paid Domestic Workers
Good relationship	17
Work relationship	79

A small number that is only seventeen number of domestic workers, especially the ones who are working in a particular home for years, remarked that they have good relationship with their employers and felt free to share their personal matters with them.

Grievances and Redressal

In Private households there is no system to deal with domestic workers' grievances at the work place. If they have anything to complain about they usually approach the female head of the family. In most of the offices a system prevails to address such grievances or issues. In a few cases there is a different version as there is no grievance redressal system since the shops are managed single handedly by the owner.

Problems at the Work Place

Table 6

Problems at the Work Place	Number of Paid Domestic Workers
Yes	83
No	13

Domestic workers suffer from a variety of problems starting from delayed payments to verbal abuse at their work place. Sometimes they must get in to arguments with their employers for correct payments. However, some domestic workers speak of good employers who not only pay their wages on time but also advance payments if need be. When the participants were asked about any form of abuse at their work place, their first reaction was a smile. The majority of them

Challenges and Issues of Paid Domestic Workers in Kanyakumari
District, Tamilnadu

were not ready to reveal such sensitive information. A domestic worker pointed out that verbal abuse was common and it happened when the domestic worker asked for leave, their wages or wage increase. In short, domestic workers experience multifaceted problems, such as delayed payment, verbal abuse, denial of leave, uncertainty in their job, and work security, but often choose to be silent as they fear negative consequences. In this study maximum number(86.45%) of domestic workers are suffering from the above mentioned problem and only thirteen (13.54%) members of domestic workers are given positive suggestions about the problem at work places.

Income

Table 7

Income	Number of Paid Domestic Workers
Sufficient	16
Not sufficient	80

The study found that (83.33%) of the domestic workers suggested that the income is not sufficient. The wages of domestic workers depend upon whether they worked in rural or urban areas. The Domestic workers' pay is less in rural area compared to that of urban. Therefore, domestic workers engaged in part-time domestic work and sought employment in multiple homes to increase their earnings. A substantial number of domestic workers received some kind of gift or additional cash during festivals.

Occupational Health

Table 8

Income	Number of Paid Domestic Workers
Healthy environment	08
Unhealthy environment	88

Irrespective of their age and experiences, the majority of domestic workers suffered with joint and back pain. Some suffered with skin problems. Domestic workers, especially those who worked in residential homes, explained they are not allowed to use washing machines and vacuum cleaners. All these insights emphasis that, maximum (91.67%) domestic workers work in an unhealthy environment.

Family Support

Table 9

Family Support	Number of Paid Domestic Workers
Yes	73
No	23

Domestic workers need to perform tasks own home in addition to the tasks performed in their work places. The support of family is decisive in continuing with their work. When the researchers asked about the support of family, domestic workers replied positively. They said that most of the time their children and at times their spouses or in-laws support then in their household tasks. But this was not applicable to all. Many domestic workers performed all their household tasks by themselves, especially those who were widowed and separated.

Factors Contributing the Paid Domestic Work

Table 10

Contributing factors to joining in paid domestic work	Number of Paid Domestic Workers
Poor economic backgrounds	46
widows or separated	24
spouses are alcoholic	14
Not have any technical skills to support other forms of employment.	12
Others	-

The study reveals that forty six domestic workers come from poor economic backgrounds, twenty four domestic workers were either widows or separated and bear the burden of family responsibilities. This means they have no choice but to take any job. For fourteen women their spouses are alcoholic and not taking up the responsibilities of a family. In addition twelve of women do not have any technical skills to support other forms of employment.

Discussion

Everyday tens of millions of people throughout the world clean other people's homes, cook meals for others, and watch over their children. their work contributes to national economies and labour markets by enabling others to carry out their own jobs (ILO,2013).The situation is not different in the Kanyakumari District, where the domestic workers are mainly from poor and socially backward

Challenges and Issues of Paid Domestic Workers in Kanyakumari District, Tamilnadu

sections, working in other people's homes, usually that of the rich and middle class. Apart from working in their own home, they have to work from morning to evening or even later, without proper recognition. Domestic workers are in a state of dependency, exploitation and quasi bondage and the biggest problem facing domestic workers across the country is their non-recognition as workers.

There is no agreement regarding the wages and tasks to be performed. The Tasks assigned to other worker are typically not specified at the time of appointment resulting in a workload that is in most cases far beyond the capacity of the worker and disproportionate to the wage paid. In addition, there is tendency to systematically increase the number of chores to be performed .The Educational and socio-economic backgrounds of the majority of women facilitates the entry of many of them into this profession.

As the study is conducted among the small group of domestic workers in Kanyakumari District, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to all domestic workers.

Decent work for domestic workers' is the slogan echoed all over the world in the last two decades. Efforts were taken by various national and international organizations, including ILO, to ensure the dignity and rights of domestic workers. But still many countries, including India, are reluctant to ratify the convention 189 and its recommendations 201. An exclusive law for domestic workers is still dream for domestic workers. The Study will help to raise the voice in support of domestic workers and bring these issues to the attention of the social work profession. There is always ample space for scientific investigation to create sustainable models in organizing domestic workers, and to find out the attitudes of employers and the families of domestic workers.

Conclusion

The Study captures the situation of paid domestic workers in our society. The Exclusion of domestic workers from the framework of an exclusive law and the age-old reluctance of society in acknowledging domestic work as "work" makes the life of millions of domestic workers arduous, and forces them to work in isolation, leaving them with low self-worth. The unfavourable working conditions experienced by domestic workers coupled with the negative attitudes of employers towards domestic workers make their live seven more miserable. Since the attention

paid to the problems of domestic workers is minimal, the findings of the study have special relevance. It may illuminate the numerous dark areas of paid domestic workers and attract more scientific research into various aspects of domestic work.

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