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ISSUES AND REALITIES OF WOMEN IN DOMESTIC WORK

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ABSTRACT

Economic necessity is forcing an increasing number of women to work, even if it does not free them from their conventional responsibilities. In search of employment, most women are engaged in unorganised economic activities such as small-scale industries, cottage industries, construction, manufacturing units, textile and garment, horticulture, agriculture, rural occupations, forest-based jobs, mining, sweeping-cleaning, loading-unloading, service industry, entertainment, temp workers, house workers, domestic helpers, time or piece-rated workers, casuals, part-time employees, own account employees, and contractual workers.

Domestic staff are found to have the lowest incomes of any category in the informal economy, along with other issues. They work on domestic chores including cooking, cleaning the floor, washing clothes, and utensil washing. They also work outside, buying veggies, etc. A large number of them fight daily to survive, live repetitive, colourless lives in slums, and deal with a variety of issues such as lengthy work hours, employment insecurity, and low status both inside their homes and outside. Many research has been conducted on female construction workers, but not much has been done on domestic workers. In order to empower this vulnerable group in society, it is necessary to learn about their socioeconomic circumstances and the issues they face with little safeguards. Hence, this issue is identified to be a major origin for taking up this study.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the previous three decades, there has been an increase in the percentage of women working in the nation. A significant portion of these unofficial female labourers are employed in the agricultural sector, traditional crafts, village and cottage industries, or they engage in various unofficial occupations such as construction sites, tanneries, match and beedi industries, upkeep of kitchen gardens and chickens, food grain grinding, water and firewood collection, etc. A World Bank estimate indicates that ninety percent of women employed in the unorganised sector are not counted in official statistics; their employment is also regarded as low-skilled, low-paying, and undocumented wage labour that is concealed from workers and does not offer benefits. A large number of such informal labour force among the women is engaged in domestic work.

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2. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study focuses on the multifaceted dimensions of domestic work by women in the informal economy. It shed light on the economic, social and legal challenges faced by them including nature of their employment characterized by lack of formal contracts which limits their bargaining power and exposing them to discrimination and exploitation. The study also highlights the government and non-government welfare schemes aimed at empowering women domestic workers assessing their accessibility to improve the working conditions ensuring social protection and providing skill development. It examines how intersectional factors such as caste, class, religion, etc. influence their experiences and vulnerabilities.

Recommendations are offered to strengthen empowerment schemes, formalize the workforce, ensure compliance with labour laws, and raise awareness about the rights of workers. This research aims to address gaps in the literature, shed light on the lived realities of women domestic workers, and advocate for effective interventions to empower them.

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3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of related literature helps the researcher to have a better understanding on various aspects of the study. Several studies carried out elsewhere by other researchers on the related aspects could also be reviewed which enhances the view of the researcher and to know about the various dimensions of the particular study undertaken. The researcher made an attempt to present the reviews available from various journals, newspapers and web portals.

Suktidasgupta (2002)[1] in her article "Organizing for socio economic security in India" emphasizes that women workers in the informal economy are amongst those with least access to social protection who has the vulnerable status at home and at work, income generation alone may not improve their socio-economic status and also their economic empowerment needs to go along with political empowerment, which could improve their bargaining power both in the household and at work. This means that organizing women workers in the informal economy could have beneficial impacts on their work and their life if such organization combines voice representation along with access to resources such as credit and information.

Surbhi Kapur and Prasana Kumarsethy (2014)[2] concluded that this unorganized sector workers need much help from both the government and society. Their upliftment is essential as they constitute large part of employment and contribute to the growth of the economy. Moreover, the unorganised sector workers face certain problems like poor health, harassment at work place, unequal wage structure, poor housing facilities, lack of safety measures and no proper education for their children. Government intervention in taking necessary steps at the legal and policy level for unorganised workers is required for improving their working and living conditions.

Bhagyashree Vadageri and Dr. M. Hilariasoundari (2016)[3] stated the reasons for women entering into the informal sector. The main reason is poverty and unemployment. These women are exploited by their employers, as the placement agencies are yet to find out strategies for the protection of these women. Lack of proper legislations and legal support has put these women domestic labourers into still more vulnerable condition. Even though the women domestic labourers work for more hours, they are paid very less which affects their personal and social life.

S. Meena Priya Dharshini (2016)[4] pointed out that in India, a woman is considered and connected mainly with household. In well-off families, with the help of servants, women are spared from household works by providing servants. Educated mothers are expected to take care of the children's education and working women need a support to be in time. It is important to note that it is the existence of servants within the household that allow the housewife or working women to perform well. Generally Domestic work includes cleaning, mopping, sweeping, washing, cleaning vessels, clearing the table after meal, cooking maintaining garden, taking the child to school as well as from school to house and other works. Neither House wife nor working women need a support to do the household so they employ domestic workers.

Ashok Kumar Katta and Anitha Kumari (2019), mentioned in their study that women constitute over two third of the workforce in this sector. Mainly due to no work available for them, or they are illiterate, or the mainly due to many financial hardships in their families. Female domestic workers flock from India's least developed areas region's like Jharkhand, west Bengal and Assam. The reason for their journey is they seek work as servants in affluent homes. They are often abused, mental, physical or sexual, of these women is not uncommon. These often lead to violence if they do not obey or misbehave or when they do not do their job properly. Then they are subject to violence.

Sanghita Bhattarcharjee and Bhaskar Goswami (2020), in their article tried to explore the different dimensions of empowerment from the study of female domestic workers. This includes workers' involvement in taking household decision, free movement, possession of assets and restricting domestic violence. By adding the obtained scores and weights of the indicators, a cumulative empowerment index is constructed. Restrictions in mobility and lack of ownership of permanent assets amongst workers indicate their subordination in the household hierarchy and highlight that women are excluded from asserting influence over household properties. Severe domestic violence against women is common and visible even when husbands are unemployed.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

i) To study the basic characteristics of women domestic workers including socio-economic conditions in Tirunelveli District
ii) To examine the problems faced by the women domestic workers in the unorganised sector.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Collection of data

The present study is based on primary data as well as secondary data. Interview schedule will be used to collect the primary data from the sample respondents. For this pilot study was made and with that response, final interview schedule was prepared to

[1] *Suktidasgupta (2002), 'Organizing for Socio-Economic Security in India', International labour Office, Geneva, ISBN 92-2-113394-X, October 2002*

[2] *Surbhikapur and Prasana Kumar Sethy (2014), 'Working and Living Conditions of Workers in Unorganized Sector', Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal, ISSN 2249-9598, vol. 4, Issue-II, March-April 2014*

[3] *Bhagyashree.S.Vadageri and Dr. M. Hilariasoundari (2016), 'Socio-Economic Problems of Women Domestic Labourers in Karnataka India', Indian Journal of Economics and Development, vol.4, April 2016*

[4] *Dr. S Meena Priya Dharshini (2016), 'A Study on Socio-Economic Status of Women Domestic Workers (WDW) in Puduvayal Sivaganga District', International Journal of Advanced Research and Development, ISSN: 2455-4030, Impact Factor: RJIF 5.24, vol. 1, Issue 7, July 2016, pp. 31-33*

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collect the information required for the study. With a view to identify the women domestic workers, the researcher has made an in-depth review of the previous studies undertaken related to the topic of the present study. Further, the researcher will collect the women domestic workers list from the district labour welfare board and will determine the number of sample respondents.

The secondary data will be collected from the published as well as unpublished reports, handbooks, action plans and registers from the office of the District labour welfare board and commerce, various books, journals, magazines, websites, etc.,

5.2 Sampling Procedure

The study is confined to Tirunelveli district. Random Sampling method can be used for the selection of the sample for the study. The list of women domestic workers maintained by district labour office will be used to identify the women domestic workers. The collected data will be analyzed properly with the help of proper tools for the effectiveness of this study.

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 Demographic profile of the respondents

The demographic profile of the respondents is given in Table 1. It shows the categorical classification of respondents with respect to age, level of education, marital status, monthly income, and the number of houses served.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the respondents

Demographic Questions	Category	Frequency (N=405)	Percentage (100%)
Age	18 – 25	32	7.90
	26 – 35	158	39.01
	36 – 45	109	26.91
	Above 45	106	26.17
Level of Education	No formal education	183	45.18
	Primary	112	27.65
	Middle	68	16.79
	SSLC	35	8.64
	HSC	7	1.73
Marital Status	Married	291	71.85
	Unmarried	114	28.15
No. of houses served per day	Only one	32	7.90
	2 – 4	267	65.92
	More than 4	37	9.13
Monthly Income	0 – 2500	11	2.72
	2501 – 5000	27	6.67
	5001 – 7500	65	16.05
	Above 7500	302	74.56

The demographic data of 405 respondents reveals important trends that frame the context of domestic work. Age distribution indicates that the majority of respondents are concentrated in the 26–35 age group (39.01%), followed by 36–45 (26.91%) and above 45 years (26.17%). This reflects that domestic work is predominantly undertaken by women in their prime working years, suggesting that economic necessity drives them into this sector during their most productive stage of life. Younger women (18–25 years) form only 7.9%, which shows that domestic work is not generally the first occupational choice but rather an alternative for women unable to access other opportunities.

Education levels reveal a stark reality: nearly 45.18% of respondents have no formal education, and another 27.65% have only primary education. This suggests that limited educational attainment is a major factor pushing women into domestic work, as higher qualifications could potentially open access to formal-sector jobs. Only 1.73% reached higher secondary education, highlighting the intergenerational cycle of poverty and limited upward mobility.

Marital status shows that 71.85% of respondents are married, implying that domestic work is a means of supplementing household income. This also indicates a dual burden—women manage household responsibilities while engaging in labor outside. Unmarried women (28.15%) are fewer, which could reflect cultural expectations regarding women's economic participation after marriage.

The workload indicator shows that the majority of workers (65.92%) serve 2–4 houses daily, while 9.13% work in more than four houses. This reflects not only the intensity of labor but also the fragmented and unstable nature of employment in the domestic sector. Workers often need to juggle multiple employers to secure a decent income, further adding to their physical and psychological stress.

In terms of income, the data reveals a striking disparity. A large majority (74.56%) earn above ₹7500 per month, yet this should not be mistaken for financial stability. Given the long hours and multiple employers involved, this income remains insufficient

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to secure social mobility or a decent standard of living in urban and semi-urban areas. Meanwhile, 16.05% earn only ₹5001–7500, and 2.72% fall below ₹2500, underscoring the persistence of economic vulnerability.

Overall, the demographic analysis underscores that women domestic workers are poorly educated, mostly married, and engaged in physically intensive labor across multiple households for inadequate wages. These characteristics directly shape their susceptibility to exploitation and limited empowerment.

6.2 Challenges faced by Women Domestic Workers

The working hours of the servant maids are not like the formal sector. It is not fixed and regulated. So that, they are exploited by working for long hours in a day. Likewise, wages leave facilities, medical benefits and rest time depends totally on the employer. They are the victims of suspicion. If anything is missing in the house, they face accusations first and deal with threats, physical violence, police conviction and even dismissal.

6.2.1 One Sample t-test

The null hypotheses set up for the purpose of one sample t-test is as follows:

H_0: There is no significant difference between problems faced by the female domestic workers.

In this test, the computed mean values of the various problem-related constructs are compared with the hypothesized mean value 3. This hypothesized value represents a neutral benchmark on a Likert scale, typically suggesting neither agreement nor disagreement about the severity of the problems. Table 2 reveals that the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected at 5% level of significance, as all p-values are less than 0.05. Thus, it implies that there is a significant difference between the problems faced the female domestic workers.

Table 2. One sample t-test: Problems faced by female domestic workers

Problems	Test Value = 3							Result
	N	Mean	Mean difference	SD	t-value	df	p-value	
Health issues	405	3.78	0.78	0.73	21.46	404	0.000**	Rejected
Social insecurity	405	3.84	0.84	0.67	25.18	404	0.000**	Rejected
Workplace exploitation	405	3.80	0.80	0.62	25.96	404	0.000**	Rejected
Inadequate wages	405	4.02	1.02	0.60	34.04	404	0.000**	Rejected
Psychological issues	405	3.95	0.95	0.61	31.39	404	0.000**	Rejected

****Significant at 0.05 level of confidence**

Using a test value of 3 as the neutral benchmark, the results strongly reject the null hypothesis in all cases, confirming that domestic workers face problems at a level significantly higher than neutral perception.

- Health issues (Mean = 3.78, $p < 0.05$): The results indicate that domestic workers frequently encounter health problems due to strenuous physical activity, lack of medical benefits, and absence of rest. Tasks such as carrying heavy loads, cleaning, and prolonged standing contribute to musculoskeletal disorders and chronic fatigue.
- Social insecurity (Mean = 3.84, $p < 0.05$): Social vulnerability emerges as another key challenge. Being part of the informal economy, domestic workers lack social security benefits like pensions, health insurance, or maternity leave. They are also socially marginalized due to caste, class, and gender hierarchies.
- Workplace exploitation (Mean = 3.80, $p < 0.05$): Exploitation takes many forms: denial of wages, verbal abuse, arbitrary termination, and absence of formal contracts. Since their work is performed within private households, accountability mechanisms are minimal, leaving them vulnerable to employer dominance.
- Inadequate wages (Mean = 4.02, $p < 0.05$): This factor recorded the highest mean score, indicating that wages remain the most pressing concern. Despite long hours and multiple jobs, domestic workers receive pay far below the living wage standards.
- Psychological issues (Mean = 3.95, $p < 0.05$): Psychological stress arises from multiple sources: job insecurity, long hours, low social recognition, and harassment. The absence of grievance redressal mechanisms intensifies this mental burden.

7. CONCLUSION

Women domestic workers play a vital yet often invisible role in sustaining households and contributing to the larger economy. Despite their significant contribution, they continue to face socio-economic challenges such as low wages, lack of social security, poor working conditions, and limited recognition of their rights. Addressing these issues requires a multi-dimensional approach that includes stronger legal protections, access to education and skill development, social security measures, and greater awareness of their contributions. Empowering women domestic workers is not only a matter of social justice but also a step towards inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Ensuring dignity, equity, and opportunities for them will pave the way for a more just and humane society.

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