

Profiles in Female Poverty: The Invisible Domestic Workers

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ABSTRACT

India women have been contributing in the economy and development since Independence. They have been working in organized as well as unorganized sectors. The unorganized sector provides jobs to illiterate and less educated population of India to meet their basic needs. Poor women living in urban areas work mainly as domestic helpers because domestic work is easily available to them. With the help of 6 cases studies of poor women domestic workers, the paper aims to study the plight of women domestic workers, the way they financially support their families, the way they live their lives. Their sense of relative deprivation is reflected in their routine conversations. Their plight will not change until they are aware of their rights and unite for their own cause. The Government needs to pay attention to their plight and provide them economic security.

KEYWORDS: Women Domestic Workers, Case Studies, Poverty, unorganized sector, relative deprivation.

INTRODUCTION

In Post Independent India, women have been playing important role in the developing economy in various capacities. Initially they were engaged in low profile jobs in organized as well as unorganized sectors. With the increasing higher and technical education opportunities, the Indian girls became eligible for jobs in sectors like medicines, engineering, management, administration, teaching and others. Their professional commitment required them to avail some domestic help to fulfill their household responsibilities. Secondly, a large number of women could not attain formal education due to several sociocultural and economic factors. Many illiterate/less educated poor women opted for some financial activity to support their family income. Domestic work came easily to them in urban areas. There are more than 35 lakh domestic workers in India as per International Labour Organization (ILO) out of which nearly 90% are females.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the plight of women domestic workers
2. To examine their social economic background
3. To understand their problems and their self-assessment

METHODOLOGY

The study has adopted the Case Study Method to examine the plight of poor women domestic workers. A few random cases have been picked up from Bijnor City, district headquarter in West Uttar Pradesh, India.

CONCEPTS USED AND OPERATIONALED

1) POVERTY

‘Poverty’ is a relative term. It is used as a condition measurable only in terms of the living standards and resources of a particular society at a given time. It means not having enough money to meet basic human life needs like food, clothes and shelter. Gillin and Gillin say, “Poverty is that condition in which a person either because of inadequate income or unwise expenditures, does not maintain a scale of living high enough to provide for his physical and mental efficiency and to enable him and his natural dependents to function usefully according to the standards of the society of which he is a member.”

There are two types of poverty- Absolute and Relative poverty. The Absolute poverty refers to the state below ‘poverty line’ where the basic requirements like food, clothing, shelter, health requirement, etc. are missing; while Relative Poverty refers to some living standards which are relative to a particular time and space. The concept of poverty has been used to study the low - socio economic status of poor women domestic workers in an urban setting.

2) CASE STUDY METHOD

A Case Study Method is a method of studying a social phenomenon thorough the analysis of an individual case. The case may be an individual, a community, a society, a group, a process or any other unit of social life. Any case under study is considered as the representative of many similar cases. Hence, making the generalization is possible. This method has been adopted in this research to study the women domestic workers. The 6 case studies are considered as representative of other women domestic workers in Bijnor city.

3) WHO IS A DOMESTIC WORKER?

A domestic worker is a person who does routine households chores like cleaning floors and utensils, washing and ironing clothes, general assisting, cooking, looking after the small children, dropping them to schools, taking care of the aged, etc. ; on part time or full time basis for one or more employer for nominal wages. The International Labour Organization (ILO) broadly defines a domestic worker as “someone who carries out household work in private households in return for wages”. There can be three types of domestic workers:- Part - time domestic worker, Full - time domestic worker, and Live - in domestic worker. The cases of women domestic workers under study in this paper have all the 3 types of domesticity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the context of the research on women domestic workers, the Theory of Relative Deprivation can be the basis of the study. Following the research by Stouffer on The American Soldier (1949), R. K. Merton refined the concept of Relative deprivation and located it within Reference Group Theory (1957, chapter 8). According to this view, individuals consider themselves deprived when they compare their personal circumstances with those who believe to prevail in their reference group. Deprivation is relative because

it is measured not against some absolute or constant standard, but rather against a variable, the standard allegedly prevailing in a reference group at a particular time.

Relative deprivation is often invoked to explain why some groups challenge their place within social, economic or political order. It is a difficult concept to use effectively: most people know others who fare better than themselves, though they are scarcely more deserving; we all are relatively deprived. Much therefore depends upon which comparisons are made, how long they have been made and how they are justified (Macmillan Student Encyclopedia of Sociology,1985).

Moreover, the evidence for the alleged condition is often entirely circumstantial. Since the notion of Relative Deprivation as contrasted with Absolute Deprivation crucially refers to a felt and experienced disparity between aspirations or expectations and reality, it is not legitimate to take the objective circumstances of a group as the sole evidence for the actor's interpretations of the situation.

PLIGHT OF WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN INDIA

The unorganized sector provides employment opportunities to the large segment of the workforce including women in India. They work on contract or daily basis and earn meager wages in return. They are able to have horizontal mobility but unable to have upward mobility due to lack of education or any skills.

The plight of women domestic workers is not up to the mark. They face challenges both at work and home. They migrate from one place to another mainly from rural area to urban area in search of livelihood. They work hard for their families. And they provide manpower to their employers but have no such facilities for themselves. Their female relatives, neighbours or their own elder children take care of the younger siblings when these women domestic workers go out to work. Many times they have unemployed or abusive husbands. Similarly, they also suffer from maltreatment, abuse or humiliation and sometimes physical violence at work place. They work for long hours, have no social security, maternity leaves, health care or pension provision resulting in sub – standard living and working conditions. Most of the domestic workers do not have trade unions to represent their voices.

PROFILES IN FEMALE POVERTY: FEW CASES STUDIES OF BIJNOR CITY

These are the few case studies of women domestic workers (All names changed):-

CASE STUDY 1 – KAMLA

Kamla is 50 years old part - time domestic worker who had come out of her home for work in the year 2006 with the aim to support the education of her daughter who was studying in class 8th that year as her alcoholic husband was not able to earn enough to meet the expenses. She was married off at the age of 17. She had become the mother of two sons and one daughter. She lost both of her sons- one was born pre- mature and the second one had fallen ill and died few months after his birth. She is illiterate but financed her daughter's education up to post graduation. Kamla did not allow her daughter to work as domestic worker who later on had worked in some private office for nearly 2 years before her marriage. Kamla and her husband had borrowed 5 lakh for her daughter's marriage whom they married off in 2016.

She had started her job nearly 16 years ago in the house of one woman college professor where she still works. She is engaged in the work of cleaning the house and utensils, dusting, drying and folding the cloths, and some other small household chores. The professor is a regular support to Kamla and helps her financially on the occasions like marriage of Kamla's daughter and Kamla's hospitalization during pandemic. Kamla works in two other households also. Presently, she earns Rs. 11,000/- per month while working in 3 households and has repaid 90% of debts. She is sincere, responsible and trustworthy person. She does not wish to work in more houses because of her growing age and her preference to stay at Professor's house. She feels homely there and shares good bonding with Professor's two daughters. Kamla has a mobile phone given by the Professor and regularly gets many household items, cloths, etc. from the Professor. Money and kinds are given to her by all the employers on festivals. She had started working in one more house to earn some extra money to repay her debts but had to leave soon after false allegation of theft against her. She prefers not to take leave unless urgent.

Weaver by caste, Kamla's lives in a joint family with her husband and brother-in-law's family in their own small house in the city. She was a victim of abuse and domestic violence earlier for property related issue, but now she reverts back, if required. Her husband works on daily wages in a sweet shop to earn Rs. 400/- per day.

CASE STUDY 2 – RITA

Saini by caste, 38 years old Rita works in 5 houses. She had got married at the age of 18 and is a mother of 5 children (3 sons and 2 daughters). Her eldest daughter is 18 years old and youngest son is 5 years old. All of her children are unmarried. Her husband is a labourer in a cement shop who usually gets Rs. 500-600/- per day. He is a heavy drinker so does not go to work everyday and contribute less to the family expenditures. They have their own house in a rural locality at the outskirts of the city of Bijnor and she travels every morning by E - riksha and reaches back home by 5 pm. Her daughter and other female family members do the cooking in her home. Earlier she was not allowed to go out of her home for work. But after two years of the birth of her fifth child, her family agreed so that she could add to her family income.

Rita is frail and looks undernourished. Consequently, she gets tired easily and takes more than fixed off days in a month. Her variety of works like cooking, cleaning utensils and floors make her to earn Rs.12,000/- per month as a part-time domestic worker. She gets extra money and kinds from the employers on festivals. Back home in the village, her family has some agriculture land too.

CASE STUDY 3 – POONAM

33 years old Poonam works in 6 houses to earn Rs. 10,000/- per month. She carries out the household chores like cleaning of the utensils and/or floor, dusting and other small stuffs. She has studied up to class 5th in a government school. She is quite energetic and active. Always smiling. But a bit careless. Poonam lives in a one room rented accommodation with her husband and children at the outskirts of the Bijnor city. Her husband works in cow's drum and gets a salary of Rs 9000 /- per month. She had got married at the age of 16 and has 5 children- three daughters and two sons. Her eldest daughter is 15 years old and works in some house as full-time helper. Youngest son is 4 years old. Four of her children go to school. She never got full maternity leaves during the birth of her last four children. Her

occasionally visible bruises reflect the domestic violence she faces at home but she is a fighter and hits back her husband sometimes. She does not wish to punish her husband legally for the reason of her family and children.

Poonam's parents as well as In-Laws live in nearby separate villages where she goes regularly. Saini by caste, she knows all the farming methods and goes to her village at the beginning of the season for cultivation of wheat and rice. Thus, her average off days in a month range from 4-5. She gets extra money as well as kinds by the employers during festivals and other occasions. She and her husband are saving money to have their own small house in the city. They did not apply for government house provided to poor people because their all documents are in their village address.

CASE STUDY 4 – NIMMO

Nimmo is a live – in domestic worker who lives in the house of one retired teacher for the last 14 years. The widow teacher does not live the city throughout the year and visits to her son's place and stays there for long period of time. So Nimmo is the caretaker of security and other household chores (except cleaning the floor) including cooking when the employer is in or out of the city. 50 years old Nimmo is Bengali and came to the city 25 years ago with some Bengali workers in the search of the work and stayed here. She is a good cook. Initially she used to cook in the few houses as part – time worker to meet her expenses. Now her husband also lives with her because both of her daughters are married. She takes all the decisions in her own house.

CASE STUDY 5 – ASHA

Asha is a young widow with 2 little daughters ages 5 and 3. Asha lost her husband in a road accident two years ago. She has passed class 12th with second division. Presently, she lives with her parents in the city and started cooking in three houses to earn some extra money. Cleaning the floors, utensils and cloths are lower to cooking job to her and she will only do them if more cooking work is not available. She takes 5-6 days off in a month as she goes to court, takes rest, or some other emergency in her home. According to her- she has filed a case against her in-laws for the property inheritance as a widow. Both of her families have big lands and properties. Back Parental home, her brother does not wish to give her share in the parental property. So he quarrels with her, beats her and wants her to leave the home. Her parents support her so her brother quarrels with them. Life is tough for her but she is optimistic about her improved condition once she gets the share in the property. She has clear plan to provide education to her daughters.

CASE STUDY 6 - SHALU

Shalu is 17 years old young girl who is one of the 4 domestic workers in a business man's house. The employers are a joint family of 9 members of three generations. All the 3 married women of this home do not go out to earn. Shalu take care of the toddler boy of the house. She gives bath, toilet practice with women of the family, changes diapers and cloths, feeds the child, plays with him etc. She works from 9-6 to earn Rs. 8000/- per month. She is scolded sometimes while taking care of the little boy. She gets lunch and tea snack twice in the employer's home. She has to maintain proper hygiene to handle the boy so she wears clean cloths.

Shalu was sent out of her home for work two years ago because her father is a riksha puller and mother cleans utensils in some houses. Shalu became an additional earning hand in the family of 6 members as she has 3 siblings. She was dropped from the school after class 8th because she was not interested in the studies. She loves makeup, listens to filmy songs and likes watching movies. She bears her own expenses and can save some money also. Shalu gets 4 days off in a month or otherwise required by her.

DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

Most of the women domestic workers are either illiterate or less educated so get low paid jobs in unorganized sector. They are part-time or full-time domestic workers to go back to their homes to take care of their families. They have come out of their homes due to their poor economic conditions. The average number of their children is 4. They work hard to support their family income even if there is occasional abuse by the husbands in some cases. They are not complaining about their work or employers. Their conversations clearly indicate the realization of their low status and relative deprivation, they seem to be contented and happy with their works and little earnings and have accepted their fate. All of them own the mobile phones. They are ration card holders and avail all the facilities provided by the government like zero balance accounts, free gas cylinder under Ujjawala Scheme 2.0, Aayushman Health Card and others. But they are not aware about the steps taken by the government for their welfare.

There are some legislation passed by the Government of India for the direct interest of domestic workers such as Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986; Domestic workers Welfare and Social Security Act, 2010; The Unorganized Sector Worker's Social Security Act, 2008 along with some other general Acts. Other Acts like Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 and 2017; Minimum Wages Act, 1948 ; Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act of 1970 which are otherwise beneficial to working women in India, do not support the women domestic workers.

CONCLUSION

Domestic work is a big hope and opportunity for lots of poor women who are not educated. This is one of the few sectors which have majority of women. It provides employment to women and girls in India. They provide cheap labour to the employers. Their pathetic plight in this unorganized sector is accepted by everybody including themselves due to various reasons like poverty, gender discrimination, lack of basic skills for better jobs, ignorance, government apathy, lack of adequate data, inadequate implementation of laws, to name a few. Their plight will not change unless they unite and fight for their rights. The Government needs to spread awareness in the society and take proper measurement to give women domestic workers their due rights and recognition to their work. They remain invisible.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DR. ALKA SAHOO

Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Bureau of Police research & Development (BPR&D) Fellow, Dr. Alka Sahoo has 23+ years teaching experience. She is an empiricist and areas of her research interest are Gender Studies, Culture, Sociology of Profession, Police Studies, Human Rights and Social Change. She is Ph.D (Sociology), M.Phil (Sociology), MA, B.Ed, and holds PG Diploma in Human rights.

Bharat Jyoti Award Winner in 2012, Dr. Alka Sahoo was nominated for 4 more awards. Her book entitled “WOMEN IN POLICE PROFESSION” (2008) is first of its kind on policewomen in Delhi Police and third of its kind in India. Before joining Sociology Department of the Vardhaman College, Bijnor (UP) in December 1999; she had worked in Women’s Studies and Development Centre, Delhi University (DU); Department of Sociology, Indira Gandhi National Open University (INGOU) and Women’s NGO JAGORI in Delhi. A life member of Indian Sociological Society, she always contributes to the Sociology discipline by her paper presentations in national/international Seminars and Conferences, Session Chair, Resource Person, valedictory Lecture; publications and newspaper interviews; member of editorial board of one bi-annual Sociological journal ‘Navrachna’ (Hindi); and holding some other administrative posts.

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