

The plight of domestic workers in India

The demand for house helps is rising but their employment terms remain exploitative, thanks to lack of legislation to protect their rights

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Sangita Pawar, 26, works as a part-time domestic help in three middle-class homes in Navi Mumbai. She visits these homes twice a day and her work involves cleaning, dusting and washing clothes and utensils. Many times, she does additional work for her employers without any extra payment. Pawar gets about Rs5,000 (Dh268) from each household.

“It is definitely better than what I would have earned in my village but then I hardly get any rest and I work on most of the festivals. Didi [the woman of the house] shouts if I take one extra day off,” says Pawar. She gets two days off in a month. Pawar and her three children are mostly dependent on her income since her husband is an alcoholic and wastes away most of his earnings.

Like Pawar, there are more than 40 million domestic workers in India and nearly 90 per cent of them are women, as per the National Platform For Domestic Workers. The number has dramatically increased in the last decade or so. “In 2004-05 there were 3.05 million women domestic workers in urban India, an increase of 222 per cent from 1999-2000,” says a report by Jagori, an NGO working in this field.

Demand and supply mismatch

There are many reasons for this dramatic increase. Possibly the most important is rapid urbanisation.

A 2010 McKinsey and Co study says that by 2030 nearly 590 million Indians will live in cities, up from 320 million now. Rapid urbanisation coupled with an increase in disposable income of the growing middle class means that there is a growing demand for domestic workers.

Further, an ever-increasing number of working women unable to cope with housework has also led to the rise in demand for domestic workers. However, this doesn't translate into increased wages and better conditions for domestic workers although there are some urban areas, such as Gurgaon in the National Capital Region, where the wages are much higher than in other areas.

This dramatic increase in the number of female domestic workers is linked to the shift from an agrarian economy to one based on services. This shift leads to the availability of cheap labour. Because of increasing demand, India has witnessed large-scale migration of girls from the tribal areas of Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha.

“My work is only to take care of a five-year old boy. I live with the family and I look after the kid when the parents are at work. I also help with household work. I am from Jharkhand and I started working about three years ago. The sad part is that while I look after their son, I had to leave my three-year old with his grandparents,” says 24-year-old Suchitra Devi. She and her husband visit their village once a year to spend time with their family. Her husband works as a driver in New Delhi.

“The endless and repetitive labour provided by them is not acknowledged as valuable work,” says the Jagori report.

The caste factor

The caste structure is very apparent in the hiring of domestic workers. Most of the time the domestic workers are women from lower castes. While earlier most of the domestic workers were men, this is no longer the case. The gendered notion of household work means that urban households end up hiring women.

“The sector now primarily comprises women domestic workers who are not recognised as ‘workers’ and their work is ‘undervalued’. This is primarily due to the gendered notion of housework — value is not ascribed to women’s work in their homes and by extension even paid work in others’ homes is not given any value or regarded as work. It is also undervalued because it is often performed by poor migrant women from lower castes,” says the Jagori report.

“They face a number of issues, ranging from non-payment, long working hours, no help in case of injury sustained while working. The fact of the matter is that everybody employs domestic workers but their work is never acknowledged and not compensated,” says Subhash Bhatnagar, director of Nirmana Society, which has been campaigning to provide social security to unorganised workers in various sectors. Recently, there has been a number of cases of abuse of domestic workers.

Domestic workers allege that middlemen, who take commission from both the employer and the employee, are the problem. In New Delhi, a “placement agency” for domestic workers can take as much as Rs25,000 to provide a domestic worker for a year. This contract generally comes to an end after 12 months and the employer is supposed to shell out the commission again to employ a domestic worker.

“They take a major chunk of our earnings. My madam told me my salary could have been almost double but for the middlemen, who took a huge commission to find a maid for them,” says Devi.

However, employers say that they don't mind paying more to the domestic helps provided they get a reliable and trained person. "I have always had a domestic worker since I am a working woman, but I find that they are extremely unreliable. It is not uncommon for them to just call up in the morning and say that they won't be coming in. They are supposed to take two days off every month but this usually stretches to four or five days. Most of these leaves are without any notice and for the flimsiest of excuses," says 40-year-old Manisha Singh, a media professional in New Delhi.

"I have also hired [a domestic help] through an agency. When they say that the maid is trained, you really have to take it with a pinch of salt. I paid a huge amount to the so-called 'placement agency', and the poor girl didn't know a word of Hindi and had no idea of North Indian food," says Singh.

The legal angle

It will be beneficial for both the employers and employees to have certain regulations governing the sector. It is with this intention that the Government of India is working on a policy to safeguard the interests of the domestic workers. This policy proposes a minimum salary of Rs9,000 per month for skilled full-time household helps along with a host of benefits such as social security cover and mandatory leaves.

"The main reason nothing much has been done in this regard is that everybody employs them, which is why they want to protect their own interests," says Bhatnagar.

However, while the change is slow to come a number of efforts have been made recently to provide legal protection and social security to domestic workers. This segment has been included in The Unorganised Workers Social Security Act of 2008 and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013. The Government also came up with a National Policy on Domestic Workers with the objective of regulation and extension of welfare.

However, the ground reality remains far from it, with an almost total absence of rules or regulations to govern this segment.

The organisations working in this field have been demanding the adoption of International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention on Decent Work For Domestic Workers to protect the rights of domestic helps in India. While legislation to protect the rights of domestic workers would be an important step, the middle class should consciously decide to treat their help with respect and dignity. That would be more potent than any legislation the government comes up with.

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