

A new name to bestow respectability, dignity on domestic workers

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The government plans to train 25 lakh domestic workers in the next 6-7 years

Existing terms have negative connotations, says NSDC chief

New Delhi, February 13:

Hoping to enhance their respect, the government wants to do away with tags such as “*didī*”, “*bai*”, “*ayah*” and “*maali*” and is looking for a new term for ‘domestic workers’.

“Domestic workers or help is a value-loaded term and often has negative connotations,” Manish Kumar, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) told *BusinessLine*, adding that the idea is to switch over to terms like, say, housekeeping staff or support staff that are used in other countries.

The proposal is understood to have been mooted by Rajiv Pratap Rudy, Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, at a recent meeting.

Kumar said NSDC has now asked the Sector Skill Council (SSC) for domestic workers to look at suitable alternatives that would improve the “image and respectability” of such workers.

Noting that domestic workers are one of the most unorganised sectors, Amod Kanth, who chairs the Domestic Workers SSC, said the proposal for change in nomenclature was part of a larger plan to enhance their dignity and improve their working and living conditions.

“We plan to train about 25 lakh domestic workers in the next six to seven years. Simultaneously, a National Policy on Domestic Workers is being finalised, while States are also taking initiatives to improve the working conditions,” Kanth said, adding that Jharkhand has recently passed the Placement Agency and Domestic Workers Protection Act. Similar laws are also in force in Chhattisgarh.

The Domestic Workers SSC has also created six job rolls or modules, including housekeeping, cooking and housekeeping, child care, elderly care, pre-natal and post-natal care and baby care to train domestic workers.

According to a report on skill requirement and human resource in the sector by KPMG and NSDC, the domestic workforce, such as general help, cook, gardener, babysitter and office assistant, is estimated to increase from six million in 2013 to 10.88 million by 2022, as more couples work and require assistance for looking after children and the elderly.

Skin deep, say unions

However, activists and trade unions working in the sector feel such changes are only ‘skin-deep’ and would do little to uplift the lot of millions of domestic workers, majority of them women, until they are covered under laws that assure minimum wages and other social security benefits.

Also, India is yet to ratify the International Labour Organisation' Convention 189 on decent work for domestic workers, which has so far been ratified by 23 countries.

In 2015, Labour Minister Bandaru Dattatreya had informed Parliament that India had failed to ratify ILO's Convention 189 as its national laws were not yet in line with the provisions of the Convention. Thereafter, a draft National Policy for Domestic Workers had been prepared, proposing a minimum wage of ₹9,000/month for skilled full-time domestic workers, along with paid and maternity leave. But, it is yet to see the light of the day.

Data availability on domestic workers in India also remains an issue. As per an ILO report last year, there is lack clarity on data availability in India, with huge discrepancies between official estimates and those from other sources, such as academics and NGOs.

While one estimate puts the figure at 90 million, another using household data said there were only 2.5 million domestic workers (in 2008), but these excluded gardeners, gatekeepers, watchmen and the residual category of "other workers" employed by private households.

(This article was published on February 13, 2017)

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