

# Domestic Workers in Indian Homes: Social Perceptions, Rights, and Realities

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## ABSTRACT

The tendency of domestic works is not only very significant but also underestimated in the Indian households and they form the backbone of the activities of social and semi social realm of the urban and semi-urban regions. They are at other times not present in policymaking and social discourse despite the fundamental services that they offer. This paper attempts to discuss the twisted political economy of domestic workers in the setting of India: the social image, rights to law, and life of domestic workers, and most importantly women in oppressed groups. The majority of the domestic workers in India are women who have moved to the urban centers to gain an opportunity in finding means of livelihood since they no longer have such means of livelihood in the countryside. Such workers are usually engaged in the domestic chores like cleaning, cooking, baby sitting and the aged. On numerous occasions, their output is however undermined as non skilled and informal, hence affects their bargaining power, wages and the terms of employment. The structure of caste, class and gender is deep-rooted in social perception of domestic work and lack of respect and desire to treat them as equal workforce are the general attitude to their work. Legal measures have not been united and strengthened with regards to domestic workers in India. Though there is a certain state that has already adopted certain form of welfare board and welfare policy, the state itself lacks a national regulation that would ensure good wages, controlled working hours, guaranteed job and a mechanism that would deter exploitation and abuse of labor. Moreover, the domestic workers mostly do not know that they actually have few rights due to ignorance; therefore, they become the targets of maltreatment. This work is also geared towards indicating the need to attain the realization of the domestic work as an official working relationship that is supposed to be handled with honor and guaranteed by the laws. Trade unions and international agencies along with the civil society organizations are slowly raising their voices that domestic workers should be covered under the laws of labor and should receive social security benefits. Sensitization of the employers and the population is also significant hence changing the social attitude that devalues domestic work. These facts are present in various ways: on one the one side, the economic insecurity, social exclusion, and even violence, which is exerted on the domestic workers is strongly juxtaposed to the generally cordial, yet servile terms into which the employer households are generally drawn.

**Key words:** *Domestic Worker, Indian Households, Informal Labor, Social Perceptions,, Gender and Caste, Workers' Rights, Labor Law in India.*

## Introduction

The Indian domestic workers represent a larger share of the urban informal workforce, but are among the most vulnerable and poorly unable workers in the country. This group of workers mostly women are involved in doing the basic chores around the home like the cleaning, cook, childcare, and elderly care. Though they play an important role in the normal functioning of homes of middle and upper classes, they lack identification, status and even legal protection. Domestic work is heavily defined by caste, class, and gender intersection. As seen in the past, domestic work is not considered respectable and associated with women of Dalit and lower caste and thus contributes to its unpopularity and oblivion. The general perception that domestic work does not need any skill also interferes with their worth in the economical and societal perspectives (Neetha, 2021). Consequently, the domestic workers are exposed to long working hours; they have insufficient wages, job security and most of them face physical and emotional abuse. Movement is a significant parameter that defines the demographic of domestic workers. Majority of women move out of rural areas and belt of the tribes to urban towns because of poverty, crop failure or the unavailability of local jobs. When they arrive in the city they are usually employed on casual terms with no contracts and are extremely susceptible to exploitation. This becomes more vulnerable by the fact that there are no formal labor laws to govern domestic work in India. Even the state level governments have implemented welfare boards, yet there is no national law that guarantees any minimum wage, paid leave, or social security (Ministry of Labour and Employment (*The Code On Social Security, 2020, n.d.*)). The social realities concerning the domestic work also influence the employer-worker relationships. Such relations are usually dictated by the culture of hierarchy and paternalism according to which domestic workers are positioned as subordinates or assistants and not as employees with employee rights and protection domestic work endures – with its oldest roots grounded in slavery and servitude, and newer ones in contemporary exploitative capitalism. Feminists the world over have analysed its occupational relations in depth to show how they reproduce race, class and gender inequalities, with many domestic workers experiencing inhumane treatment. But feminists also use domestic

help. Should such feminists and paid domestic work be condemned, or can it be reconciled with the overarching feminist goals of equality and liberation that encompass all dimensions of discrimination? My research approaches this question through an interrogation of outsourced domestic cleaning in the UK and India. The primary data include 91 semi structured interviews with White and Indian women working as cleaning service-providers and White and Indian female academics with an interest in feminism/gender and who were outsourcing domestic cleaning (or had outsourced previously), in the UK and India, respectively. My analytical approach, rooted in my particular varifocal diasporic gaze, draws on Mary Douglas's anthropology-based cultural theory, which she used to show how comparative analysis enhances sociological understandings of the workings of the West's own institutions and culture. My cross-cultural analysis thus takes into account similarities and differences between and within the four groups of participating women, as well as silences in the data. My findings reveal that in the modern urban context, outsourced domestic cleaning can be done as work (i.e. using mental and manual skills and effort and performed under decent, democratic work conditions) or as labour (requiring mainly manual labour, accompanied by exertion of 'natural' emotional/affective labour and performed in undemocratic conditions). The issue at stake for feminism(s) is not just some women doing the demeaning work of other women but the classed evolution of the very meanings of work in contemporary. This denies them their right to justice and fair treatment whether at home or outside it. Considering the necessity of such unrecognized work as domestic work, it is so important to re-assess the currently existing platforms that regulate rights of the labor in India (*Should One Even Consider Making Domestic Work Part of the Gig Economy?, 2025*). With the help of discussing the rights, realities, and perceptions of domestic work, a more suitable and equitable world can be approached.

## Background of the Dealing of Domestic Work in India (Historical)

Model of wheel of privileges in India has its Indian domestic labour in history of slave relations of the caste and colonialism. Inculcation of Domestic slavery Along with slavery in the field, domestic slavery was instituted by the elite in their estates during the colonial era and the laborers were largely

confined amongst the downtrodden groups, including castes and tribes. They were hereditary positions and hence created a social division of the closed houses. This system is now changing after some period of independence and power was not changed in real terms and domestic labour is still informal, low paid and unacknowledged.

### Gendered Nature of Homework

The domestic work in India is extremely feminoid in nature since such laborers are always dominated by the women. Even the ideology of patriarchy puts women, as people which are already predisposed to be the keepers of the place, to perform cleaning chores and raise people when this image leads to such perception of domestic work as not real work.

### Castes and Classes Values

Castes and classes play a very significant role in the determination of labor relations, at the domestic level, in India. The upper castes or classes appeal to most of the employers and a majority of the workers belong to the Dalit or tribal origin. Often, the inequality in a therapeutic facility such as making use of different cooking utensils and lesser the convenience of toilets and water is widely used and culminates in extreme caste prejudices. The result of those prejudices is an unequal balance of power and further marginalizing of workers. Ray & Qayum (2009) paper is on the exclusion of the supply of domestic labor to the Dalit women in the elitist cities that are part of castes in the urban elite houses. Even though the study by Kalita (2020) concentrates on the cities within the metropolitan, it validates the fact that caste does mediate the experiences of domestic work in the metropolis as well.



Fig. 1. Showing Lack of Legal Protection and Regulation

### Poor Working Conditions and Exploitation

Domestic employees are not quite fortunate in regards to the conditions under which they have to

work. Majority of them are compelled to labor and not be able to rest, get proper food and shelter in case they are live-in laborers. The physical, the verbal and even sexual mistreatments are not documented due to the fear of getting dismissed. They hardly have a control over the working hours, duties and salaries and are dismissed abruptly. The ILO (2011) attributes the very presence of such looting of wages as the wage theft, overworking, and abuse to Indian families. According to Chen (2011), their labour is regarded as invisible and thus, their rights are most times.

### Migration and Openness

Most of the domestic workers are the internal migrants, especially the young women of poorer regions; e.g. Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and West Bengal. These women are an easy prey and are wooed by the trafficking agents/ or by the placement agencies. They are also paperless, they do not have a language and a social network to demand justice or to enjoy fair working conditions. They expose domestic workers to the insecure migration routes and trafficking, which is described by Kalita (2020). Based on its survey of rural women and low literate women being engaged in domestic work, it found out that they are now more migrating to domestic work.

### Child Labor Domestic child work

Despite the fact that Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, has made the employment of domestic helpers illegal, thousands of children continue to work as domestic helpers. They become vulnerable as regards to physical and emotional violence and lack of education and proper childhood. Child labor is a hidden issue due to the attitude of the society towards the domestic work which does not realize that it is a hazardous occupation.

As stated by Neetha (2009) and Ministry of Labour (2017), child labour in domestic work happens to be one of the top industries in India despite this being an illegal activity. At home there are mostly girls with an age range of between 10 and 14 years.

### Social Perception and Stigma

Domestic work is largely viewed as degrading, lowly and subservient. Such perception affects how the work is done with domestic workers and how the domestic workers perceive about them as indi-

viduals. In most instances, the employers forget to treat their employees as human beings or people who have rights. This additional negativity does not allow unity or social upward mobility among this group of employees.

**Struggles for Recognition and Unionization**

Even domestic work force in various parts of India is ganging up to demand their rights and recognition. Some organizations, such as National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM) and SEWA, have helped in raising awareness, democratization and lobbying the law. These programs must fight many of these hurdles which include insufficient revenue, the misfortune of the employers and decentralization of local labor.

Chen (2011) says that unionized domestic workers will tend to leave and also to claim decent wages. ILO (2011) ILO substantiates this endeavour by postulating that, collective bargaining is an essential item when it comes to achieving life enhancing results of the automobile workers.

**Communionisation and Collective Bargaining**

Lack of collective bargaining power is among the worst fate of the domestic workers. But unlike their counterparts who are employed in the formal industries, the domestic workers do not very often have organised forums, which would permit them to ventilate their grievances. However, in India, there is little incidence of grassroots organizations and union of domestic workers starting. These types of union are of help in making individuals know their legal rights and ensure that they get fair salaries and promote changes in policies. These include National Domestic workers Movement (NDWM) and Self Employed Women Association (SEWA) whose participation has been critical in the empowerment of the domestic workers. Nevertheless, they would be even more effective when better supported by the state and the civil society(*Women Domestic Workers and Nurses in India’s Migration Policy, 2020*).

**Unionization and Collective Bargaining**

Domestic workers lack formal channels to express grievances. Few have access to unions, but where they exist, positive changes are evident.

**Policy Process and Policy Function**

The Indian government has also come up with some acts to protect domestic workers some of which include Unorganised Workers Social Security Act (2008) and inclusion in the Minimum Wages Act in some states. However, it has poor implementation. The rights of most of the domestic workers are unknown and their work belongs to the informal sector making it difficult to put them under authority. Besides, the ILO Convention 189 has not yet been ratified in India which constitutes a complete ways through which rights of the domestic workers may be realized. One of the measures that can provide this working population with some boost will be to strengthen these policies, synchronize them between states as well as to act upon them effectively(*Women Domestic Workers and Nurses in India’s Migration Policy, 2020*).

**Entitlement to Welfare and Social Security Plans**

Access by domestic workers to their basic social security schemes like health insurance, maternity leaves, pension or getting refunds in case of accident is mostly not available. The registration and the pay-



Fig. 2. Showing Entitlement to Welfare and Social Security Plans

Union Name	Region Active	Key Role
National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM)	Pan-India	Advocacy, legal support, policy reforms
Self-Employed	Women’s Association (SEWA)	Gujarat, Delhi, others Women empowerment, social security access
Domestic Workers Forum	Tamil Nadu	Promotes rights, wages, welfare registration

ment of benefits are not consistent in the cases that involve the existence of the welfare boards. None of these workers has any identity documents or employment documentations thus is not able to enroll in government schemes. In order to have efficient transformation, we require simple process of registration, mobile welfare camps and contact to schemes like ESIC, PM-JAY and Ujjwala Yojana. These are other workers who continue to live in danger of becoming poor, sick and unprotected even in the absence of social protection.

**Access to Social Security and Welfare Schemes**

Most workers remain outside the purview of welfare benefits due to lack of documentation or awareness.

**Gender and Abuse Discrimination**

The domestic work is mostly done by the women and the feminine side of the employment produces other shades of discrimination. The women who are employed as domestic workers are at maximum risk of becoming sexually harassed and being verbally and mentally abused by the employers. They can work to perform their duties that are not stipulated in their job description without adjusting their additional wages.

In others, they are denied food, rest and clean environment on working days. (Lazarova *et al.*, 2023)

**The Cultural Prejudice Bounciness and the Social Blench Change**

It is a part of the culture of the Indian population to place domestic workers in a lower level of the scale. Many employers view them that way, as servants rather than individuals providing a service. This causes some discrimination such as not letting them to share common toilets or not letting them move freely in homes. Ingrained caste and class discrimination causes such habits. The phrase of dignity of labor has to be propagated in the form of awareness campaigns, education of the children in schools and other messages that are displayed in society at large

so as to make a difference. Promoting the dignity of the domestic workers on the movies and media, and in the discussion can do much in modifying ideas and uprooting discrimination in daily routine (Jacob, 2025).

**Documentary and legal identity issues**

Lack of legal identity or work documents is perhaps one of the major predicaments of domestic workers. A government ID like Aadhaar or a voter card which will be needed to access any of the public services, or even to enroll in any of the welfare schemes is not available to most of the migrant as also non-migrant domestic workers. They are also hired at odd hours and in most cases there is no record of working or even contracting which implies the workers are not even shown conclusive records of their working life experience, the rate of pay that they are at, or even termination. One of the means of bridging the gap and to provide a legality and responsibility will be uniform work contracts or the electronic employment records, maintained at the town hall or the organs of trade unions.

**Urban Migration and Domestic Work**

Migration from rural to urban areas has significantly increased the number of domestic workers in Indian cities. Most of these migrants are women escaping



Fig. 2. Legal Identity and Documentation Challenges

Scheme	Benefit	Challenges Faced
ESIC, PM-JAY (Health)	Free/subsidized treatment medical	Not accessible without formal employment
National Pension Scheme (NPS)	Retirement benefits	Low enrollment among informal workers
Ujjwala Yojana	Free LPG connections	Not targeted specifically at domestic workers

poverty, lack of employment, or displacement due to climate change or conflict. Unfortunately, upon arrival in urban areas, they often enter domestic service through informal channels, which exposes them to exploitation, trafficking, and debt bondage. Without access to affordable housing or childcare, these workers live in slums or temporary shelters in unsafe conditions (Jacob, 2025). Urban planning must include social housing, day-care centers, and transport support for this working group to ensure their well-being and productivity.

### Urban Migration and Domestic Work

Rural to urban migration feeds the domestic workforce, especially in metros.

Reason for Migration	Resulting Challenge in Cities
Lack of jobs in villages	Domestic work becomes fallback livelihood
Natural disasters, conflict	Emergency migration, no support on arrival
Family debt or dowry problems	Vulnerability to exploitative labor practices

### Child Domestic Labour: A Hidden Crisis

Child labour with the bans in the law still exists in the domain of the domestic sector, especially the one of young girls. They are employed to clean the houses, cook and take care of children and are highly vulnerable to abuse, negligence and lack of education. Child labor can be justified by families as beneficial to them or even viewing them as children which is tantamount to neglecting the abusive nature of the same. Child labour prohibition and regulation amendment act 2016 requires its enforcement and communal awareness and responsibility of the employers in making sure child labour is eliminated in the house.

### The impacts of the COVID-19 on the Domestic Workers

The COVID-19 pandemic obliterated domestic workers. Many individuals lost their jobs in lockdowns without wages and predictions (Ravi, 2021). What they awaited is exposure to health risk without even the provision of PPE of even medical facilities to give attention to medical problems. In addition, the stigmatization of the domestic workers as carriers of the virus has escalated a lot leading to loss of their employment and social isolation. This

sector has not been well performing post pandemic. They are effective and efficient due to access given to them to specific financial assistance, vaccination, health insurance, and livelihood requirements in the emergencies to make them more resilient to the domestic workers and ready to overcome the disasters in future (De Foo *et al.*, 2023).

### Ways of Becoming Strong and Accepted

The workers who work at homes ought to be honoured and have the rights and to facilitate that, multi level approach is essential. These include formalities of framing employment contracts, commencement of delivery of skill certification programs, helpline or mobile applications to grievance redressal. They can form partnership with local bodies and resident welfare associations to create worker registries on neighborhood basis. In addition, their socio-economic mobility can be encouraged by means of providing domestic vacancies in the vocational curriculums, offering financial literacy services, legal aid services, etc. The long awaited reforming on policy must be supported by reforming perception that is to say to assure domestic workers something of dignity, security and something of a future at least in their live and working.

### Conclusion

Domestic workers play a vital yet often overlooked role in the functioning of Indian households. Despite their indispensable contributions, they frequently face systemic discrimination, exploitation, and invisibility in both public discourse and policy frameworks. The deeply embedded socio-cultural perceptions categorize domestic work as "low status," often associating it with caste, class, and gender hierarchies. As a result, many domestic workers are subjected to poor working conditions, long hours, low wages, and a lack of job security or social benefits (admin, 2025). Although recent years have witnessed increasing awareness regarding the rights of domestic workers, significant gaps remain in the implementation of protective legislation, such as the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act (2008) and state-specific welfare boards. These initiatives, though promising, are limited in outreach and effectiveness due to lack of enforcement mechanisms and societal indifference (admin, 2025). Moreover, informal employment relationships make it difficult to regulate employers and hold them accountable.

Changing the status quo requires a multipronged approach. Legal recognition, fair wages, decent working conditions, and social security must be ensured through robust and inclusive policies. Simultaneously, efforts must be made to shift societal attitudes that devalue domestic work. Education, awareness campaigns, and unionization efforts can play crucial roles in empowering domestic workers to claim their rights. In conclusion, recognizing domestic workers as essential contributors to the economy and society is not just a matter of justice, but also a step toward inclusive and equitable development (Rai *et al.*, 2019). Bridging the gap between rights and realities is imperative to ensure dignity, respect, and protection for millions of domestic workers across India. Future reforms must be rooted in participatory approaches that center the voices and lived experiences of these workers, allowing them to emerge not as silent laborers, but as agents of social change.

**Conflict of Interest-** None

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