

Changing Dynamics of Domestic Work in Urban India

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ABSTRACT

The nature of domestic work is changing colossally in urban India as a result of change in social-economic, cultural and technological dimensions. Domestic work that is generally seen as highly informal and undocumented field was done by a woman most of the time in the past and currently, has become a significant component of urban families and to a larger extent the fledgling middle classes and higher classes. The requirements of domestic support have been augmented by reasons which encompass, a greater womanly presence within the workplace, a nuclear syndrome family, exodus to the cities, an orientation to lifestyle and so on. Meanwhile, there is another gradual transformation in the attitude towards domestic workers who can and are as servants, not workers, or helpers, though there is the difference in wages, stability of employment and social recognition. There are also effects of urbanization, policy interventions including major labor regulations and social insurance schemes on work life and labour rights which have not been implemented on an equal basis. Even innovation techniques that entail technological platforms and implementation of app-based services are trying to institutionalize renting practices, where new form of interaction and increased access to employment exists. Nonetheless, the issues that include exploitation, caste and gender discrimination, and the lack of formal contracts in the profession remain a barrier. These changes in urban realities will be evaluated against these changes in the definition of the way domestic work should be and the paper will speculate a more inclusive understanding of where lies dignity, rights, and respect to domestic workers residing in the new emerging urban future in India.

Key words: Domestic work, Urban India, Informal labor, Women workers, Migration, Urbanization, Gender roles, Social security, Labor rights, Technological platforms.

Introduction

Home labour in the metropolitan regions of India has been an extremely essential task yet underrated sector of work. Linked to the unpaid female labour and confined to the domestic spheres, the job of domestic labour has been immensely informal, unregulated and concealed in the aspect of policy and law (Neetha, 2008). The middle income aspirations are augmenting as the cities have become extremely urbanized and because of the shift between the tra-

ditions of joint family to nuclear family, there is a surging demand of domestic workers in the metropolitan cities. This demand is also a result of the influx of women into the formal job market as such working women will seek the services of the domestic sector so that they can attain the mainstream work home equation (Ray and Qayum, 2009). Even though they serve to assist urban families to improve on the functioning of smooth operations, domestic workers are faced with exploitative conditions. Most of them are employed on the no contract

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basis without minimum wages, and they do not even receive the most basic rights like leave, health insurance, and social security (Torm and Oehme, 2024). They are mostly women, who are Dalits, Adivasi or Backwards caste individuals, which further subjugate the caste and gender subordination in their everyday realities of interaction with the employer (Sabharwal and Sonalkar, 2015). Even though the social nomenclature used by the society to define the role of domestic worker has evolved over time and the terminologies used previously like servants have shifted to helpers, there has not been much progress with regard to raising the social status of the workers and working dignity with regard to workplace. Notably, technological advances have in the recent past begun to influence the labor relations in the nation. Applying the service of companies such as Urban Company and Helper4U, etc. is attempting to standardize the hiring procedure by outsourcing the services, its ratings, and background checks. As much as they augment the exposure of the jobs and offer some protection, the platforms are also potentially exclusionary to the workers who do not have a digital literacy or smartphone (Oteng *et al.*, 2024). In addition, the migrant domestic workers who predominately live in informal settlements with diminished abilities to access service, are further at risk, of displacement and poverty besides the lack of the legal identity (Oteng *et al.*, 2024). The response to worker protection in new legislative frameworks such as Unorganised Workers Social Securities Act (2008) and minimum wages law on the state level are indicative of a positive trend but practice is sporadic and unequal at the time of writing.

Urbanization and Increased Demand for Domestic Workers

Industrialization and the Needs of More Population to Work at the Home Regions

There has been an incredible growth in the demand of domestic work in urban India on the basis of expanding nuclear families, two income families and busy life style. The number of women in formal employment is on the increase and, thus, it is natural to outsource domestic duties. The labor concentration at domestic scale has been achieved in big cities in India like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru by migrant women who have occupied that space to earn some income to sustain their households and

families. This necessity of depending upon these workers is as much a luxury as it is usual to be the case with urban families.

Feminization of Home Labor, Immigration

Most urban domestic workers in the cities tend to be migrants of the rural areas, most of them are women. Women have been migrating not only on the basis of economy but also due to the lack of job quotient in villages and because of natural calamity. They tend to have access to the domestic work and are easier in cities. The maternal roles coupled with the household cleaning work has seen the demographical flow of women into the domestic roles of a caretaker and a cleaner as prescribed by the conventions of the gender and social forces (Harris *et al.*, 2022).

Informality and Exploitation in the Sector

Domestic work in India is characterized by informality. Most workers are hired verbally, without contracts or documentation. This lack of formal structure leaves them vulnerable to exploitation—long hours, low pay, no paid leave, and even verbal or physical abuse. Many are not paid the minimum wage, especially part-time workers. The home, as a private workplace, further complicates inspection, legal oversight, and rights enforcement.



Caste, Class, and Gender Bias

Most of the domestic workers are women assembly of the marginalized sections like, Dalits and Adivasis and Other Backward Classes. The employers will treat them in accordance to their social identity. Discrimination is still common in many homes in the urban areas in terms of food and utensil used, use of bathrooms and aspects related to remunera-

tion. These caste and level systems are also combined through the gender, which reinforces inequality of the system. The work of the house is not a straightforward issue of a labor employment it is highly entangled with the way social stratification is in India.

Unlawful Protection and Policy unravels

The workers in India without an organisation have laws but no broad central law on the domestic workers. The new Unorganised Workers Social Security Act (2008) and some proposed bills, such as Domestic Workers Welfare and Social Security Bill are not being enforced with force (Harris *et al.*, 2022). Enforcement in some states reverts to minimum wages or doles boards but with minimal continuity in doing this. There is no nationwide law that can assure the working rights of the employees, such as good wages, holiday, or social security.

Digital platforms and Technology interventions

The rising of the digital economy like Urban Company, Helper4U, and Book My Bai to hire domestic workers has counteracted the manner in which they are using them. The sites offer services such as hourly cleaning/caregiving, profiles that have been authorized and ratings. Although they are associated with visibility and convenience, these factors are also coupled with concerns that relate to algorithmic control, inequality in sharing profits, and marginalization of the older workers who lack access to digital platforms. Moreover, the majority of these platforms regard the workers as service providers but do not assume responsibility of benefits including insurance or taking leaves (Harris *et al.*, 2022).



The vulnerability of the Domestic Workers to COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 revealed how precarious the domestic work is. Due to the intensified use of lockdown, many people lost their jobs, did not receive salaries, and felt more and more unsecured in their jobs. This was accompanied by fear of being infected with the virus hence the employers left most of the workers or denied them permission to live in the housing societies. In most cases, their financial status was aggravated due to lack of savings, food and government relief. The pandemic made it clear that the domestic workers need and want to have status and protection, and it is highly significant.

Emerging Worker Collectives and Unionization Efforts

Despite challenges, domestic workers in some cities have begun forming unions and collectives to demand fair wages, working conditions, and recognition. Organizations like SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) and NDWM (National Domestic Workers Movement) have played key roles in mobilizing domestic workers. These groups advocate for legal reform, provide training, and raise

Table. Key Worker Collectives and their Roles

Organization	Founded	Primary Focus Areas	Impact/Outcome
SEWA	1972	Organizing informal women workers, including domestic workers	Legal awareness, training, access to social security
NDWM	1985	Advocacy for domestic workers' rights	Policy advocacy, national network of domestic workers
Jagori	1984	Gender rights and violence prevention for workers	Support groups, safety workshops
Domestic Workers Forum	2000s	Regional networks in southern India	Legal support, minimum wage demands
Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement	2002	Legal identity and unionization	Membership cards, job security efforts

awareness. Their efforts are slowly helping workers claim their rights and dignity in a deeply unequal employment landscape.

- Organizing awareness campaigns
- Conducting skills training
- Lobbying for policy and legal reforms
- Negotiating with employers
- Assisting in collective bargaining

Their work has contributed to growing recognition of domestic workers as an essential labor force. Though challenges like legal invisibility, lack of national legislation, and employer resistance persist, these unions offer hope for change. Through solidarity and empowerment, domestic workers are beginning to reclaim agency in an unequal economic and social structure.

Need for Inclusive Policy and Social Recognition

The flexibility of domestic work in the urban setting has been accompanied by the necessity that has led to a requirement of a robust based policy frame work. Majority of them have involvements in written contracts, minimum wage schedule, fulfillment of grievance redress, maternity compensation, and access to healthcare and education to both the workers and the remaining family. The change is also necessary in the social attitude-sensitivity- in believing the domestics to be the workers who deserve to be treated equal to the others as people. They should be a part of the Indian saga of development as the role they play to maintain the Indian urban economy and the family system are important factors which should be taken into consideration (Sen and Guchhait, 2021).

Conclusion

A confluence of social, technological and policy changes is imminent resulting in the paradigm shift in the world of the domestic worker in the urban India. The trend setting urban labour was also larger because the labour facilitation was feminised, formalised, migrated to city, part time, live out employment, lastly, domestic work. All these are structural issues that include job insecurity, social protection and absence of legal protection despite the fact that the services they provide are significant. But the shift of horizon can be noted at the empowerment level. The emergence of workers unions, including SEWA and NDWM, more associated with online environments, and the union of the activists online is helping the domestic workers to show up on their own behalf and on getting improved conditions

(Banerjee and Wilks, 2022). The manifestation of an evolving sense of coming up as domestic workers whose work is real, decent and is rewarded in terms of money and legislation is the unionization, registration and even skills trainings. The alteration of policy, not only in the country but also the state territory and the increased awareness of the population would prove very useful in transforming this segment. The cities will only get bigger- As there are changes in household economy, there will still be domestic labor demanded. The labor rights of these workers do not the only question in play as justice and equity are also among the aspects that will lead to a more inclusive future of the cities (Banerjee and Wilks, 2022).

Conflict of Interest- None.

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