
WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN KERALA, INDIA

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Abstract

Women domestic workers constitute a large share of unorganised workforce in India. Though men are also engaged in this type of work there is a trend towards feminisation of domestic work. People from backward social and economic background are mainly involved in this work. The increase in number of domestic workers in India is attributed to a increase in per capita income of affluent sections, increased female work participation rate, disintegration of joint families, increase in life expectancy with increase in morbidity levels. The paper based on survey in Thrissur district of Kerala State in India points out the social factors leading the women to domestic work and also highlights the fact that these women from Kerala enjoy a higher degree socio economic empowerment and also a better wage rate along with good working conditions.

Keywords: domestic workers, women, Thrissur, empowerment

Introduction

The Indian economy is dominated by unorganised sector engaging more than ninety percent of the workforce. A large proportion of socially and economically underprivileged sections of society are working in these unorganized sectors. Ninety five percent of female workforce in India is employed in this sector. The condition of the work force in this sector is in a very poor condition with low wages, unsatisfactory working conditions, no job security and other social security benefits. Labour laws are not adequate to ensure good conditions of work and security to these workers. The conditions of women in unorganised sectors are more miserable compared to their male counterparts. But the question of survival forces these women to undertake menial jobs in the unorganised sector.

Women constitute 48.46 percent of the total population in India and about 25.67 percent of female population is designated as workers and a majority of them are engaged in unorganised sectors. Of all the occupations in unorganised sector, domestic work is one of the prominent ones world over. In 2011 female work participation rate in India was 25.5 percent which is much lower than the male work

participation rate of 53.3 percent. Among the states , Himachal Pradesh had highest female work participation rate (44.8 percent) whereas Delhi had the lowest female work participation rate (10.6 percent).Females constituted 25 percent of the workforce with a share of 30.0 percent in rural areas and 15.4 percent in urban areas. 59.6 percent are main workers and 40.4 percent are marginal workers.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates around 53 million people worldwide were employed as domestic workers in 2010, with 83 percent of them being women. Asia and the Pacific region has the largest number of domestic workers, approximately 21.5 million people are employed by private households. Asian countries have largest proportion of domestic workers at 41 percent followed by Latin American and Caribbean. Domestic labour contributes 1.7 per cent of total employment worldwide and is a female dominated sector. Globally, one in every 13 female wage workers is a domestic worker (or 7.5 per cent), and the ratio is as high as one in four in Latin America. Though there are no recent statistics on domestic workers in India the NSSO 61st round points out that there are 4.2 million domestic workers in the country. NSSO data shows that in India, female housemaids or servants form the largest sub-category among domestic workers. The recent trends of large number of domestic work force in Asia indicate the growth of this sector in two largely populated countries of the world-China and India.

Kerala is well known for its model of development with high social indicators in co existence with low economic background. Kerala a state with highest literacy, favourable sex ratio, highest HDI and PQLI in the country, has a female work participation rate of only 18.2 percent much lower than the national average. Kerala has the second largest number of women jobseekers preceded by Tamil Nadu. Eighty one percent of workforce in Kerala is engaged in unorganised sector and the proportion of males (82.0 percent) is higher than female (79 percent) which is a different situation in comparison to all the other states and also in terms of national average (90.7percent males ,95.9 percent females).There are no reliable estimates on number of domestic workers in Kerala but observation in rural and urban Kerala indicate the increased number of women domestic helpers . Their presence is not only in the affluent families but also in middle income families.

Domestic Worker-Definition

A domestic worker may work on full-time or part-time basis for cash or kind,, may be employed by a single household or works for different household, may be residing in the household of the employer as live-in worker or may be living in his own residence. The Draft National Policy of on Domestic workers as recommended by the Taskforce on domestic Workers classifies domestic workers as

Part time worker who works for one or more employers for a specified number of hours per day or performs specific tasks for each of the multiple employers every day

Full time worker who works full time for a single employer everyday

Live in worker who works full time for a single employer and stays in the premises of the employer or in a dwelling provided by the employer and does not return back home daily after work

Statement of the Problem

Domestic workers constitute a major share of unorganized women workforce. It is considered to be the better option for skill less, poor women from rural and urban areas. These domestic workers indulge in jobs like cleaning, washing, cooking, gardening, baby care, caring the sick and the aged and other regular household management. Majority of these domestic workers are women and they work full time or part time with households. In Kerala with increasing trends towards female education and employment the demand for domestic workers have increased manifold. The disintegration of joint families, urbanization and migration to cities improvement in socio economic status, increasing life expectancy with increasing morbidity levels has increased the dependence of households on domestic workers for their regular household chores. A large scale migration from rural to urban area for employment as domestic workers is noted. Women from Kerala mainly emigrate to other countries especially gulf region for being employed as domestic workers. This indicates femininisation of these workers and of migration. The insufficiency of labour laws leads to exploitation in form of low wages, heavy work and poor working conditions, inadequate social security benefits, physical, mental and sexual harassment. The workers moving abroad through placement agencies are exploited to a greater extent by improper visa arrangement, exploitation by employers- physical and sexual, forced employment and so on. Amidst the discussions and arguments on the security or exploitation of workforce, job status and prospects, a large group of females are taking up these jobs and are also willing to other states or countries to have an economic edge. A widening gap is noted in demand and supply in Kerala for this category of workers which needs attention.

Objectives of the Study

The study Women Domestic Workers in Kerala, India is proposed with the following objectives:-

1. To examine the socio economic profile of female domestic workers from Thrissur District
2. To enquire about their working conditions.
3. To analyse the socio economic empowerment of women domestic workers

Methodology of the Study

The paper is based on primary survey. The data is collected from a sample of 100 women domestic workers working in different parts of Thrissur district - the cultural capital of Kerala. The study is both quantitative and qualitative. The sample survey was

conducted on basis of pre structured schedules and personal interviews with the respondents and analysed using percentages. Thrissur district which is taken as the study area is the centre of trade and commerce in Kerala and there is diversity in occupations and socio economic set up of the society. A large number of domestic workers are moving to the city limits from the suburban areas to be employed as domestic help in households.

Findings and Discussions

Demographic Characteristics

Majority of the female workforce employed as domestic workers belonged to the age group 45-60. Seventy three percent belonged to the category and twenty one percent belonged to the age category 30-45. This point out that increased family responsibilities have made women takes up jobs as domestic help. Only two of the respondents of the sample are between age group 18-30. Four percent of the respondents are above 60 years of age. The younger generations of females have higher preference for jobs like sales girls, in small offices, typing works, tailoring and so on. They prefer better status and glamour and are not interested in performing manual work. The elderly workers are happy to continue with their work as they feel that the job has raised their economic status. Eighty six percent of the respondents are married and nine percent are widows and five percent are separated. The educational qualification indicates that many of these female workers have low level of education. This has prevented them from going for other productive occupations. Seventy percent of the respondents were Hindus and sixty one percent belonged to Scheduled Castes or other backward communities. Sixty six percent of the respondents have qualification below SSLC/Class X, twenty percent have SSLC/ Class X as highest qualification. Five persons in the sample has diploma in nursing, lab technician and typewriting. They have come to this job due to ease of availability of job and the good wage it provided.

Forty Seven percent of the respondents have an average of 7-10 members in the family and 33 percent has 4-6 members in the family. Seventy nine percent has 2 or more earning members including the respondent. Twenty one percent of them are sole earning members of the family. They are mainly widows, divorcees or women whose husbands are sick or invalid. Some of them have their sons and daughters as earning members. Forty three percent of respondents have their husbands employed as semi skilled or unskilled workers in construction sector. Twenty percent are coolies in other sectors. Seven percent are unemployed. Eight percent are engaged in agriculture, poultry and dairying and the rest are employed as drivers, tailors and so like.

Work Profile

There are different reasons for the workers to be employed. Ninety one percent of the respondents have pointed out finance as main reason for working. Eighteen percent of them are sole earning members as their husband is sick or they are widows or separated. Three percent indicates that their husbands do not contribute anything though they work. The respondents have opted for this job for its high wages than other occupations with their limited skill. Seventy nine percent have marked their preference as higher wages, nine percent have pointed out that they lack skills required for other jobs. Seven percent have opted the sector for ease of availability of work and five percent feel it convenient with the time schedule. They can adopt flexible timing suitable to their family requirements. Twenty three percent of the respondents have been in the field for past 5-12 years and thirty seven percent of the respondents have been in the field for 12-20 years and twenty two percent have worked for more than 20 years. A large numbers employed in other sectors have presently entered into this job due the better prospects. Recently there is a great demand for these workers and pay prospects are also high.

Only eight percent work fulltime in one household. Ninety two percent work part time on average of 5-8 houses every week. Though there is good demand for these workers they prefer only to work for 6 days a week due to due to personal and health problems and a preference for leisure. Only two percent work for seven days a week. At times of emergencies or at festivals or during other occasions in the employer family the workers work overtime for an additional pay. None of the surveyed respondents have regular live in jobs but rarely undertakes on special request from employer. The domestic workforce are mainly engaged in cleaning jobs- sweeping and mopping the floor and cleaning the toilets and washing the utensils, eighty eight percent are engaged in the job. Five percent are involved in cooking and cleaning. Four percent take care of children. Three percent takes care of the aged persons along with maintenance of the house.

The women workers are happy with their job but twenty three percent point out misbehavior by some employers. Fourteen percent point out strenuous job putting a toll on their health. The workers often maintain a close bond with the women in the household. They share their joys and sorrows and also take guidance regarding treatment of sick or education or job of children. The aged women in the households often ensure that these workers are treated well. Eighty eight percent suffer from joint pain and back ache, sixty three percent suffer from gynecological disorders. Twenty percent suffer from respiratory disorders .Other health problems include headache, stomach disorders, urinary infections and so on. In some cases medicines for minor illnesses are given by employers. These women are more concerned about their families and hence resort to medical health only under extreme circumstances.

Ninety four percent have not registered in any agency for employment. They are employed mainly by acquaintance with the households or through information from friends, neighbours or relatives. They feel that through agencies they cannot stick to one household and they have to pay commission to the agency. Often the agency registered workers have to travel to distant places or are exploited. There is also a preference for non agency workers by the households. Forty one percent of the respondents travel between 1-5 kms for work. Twenty seven percent travel between 5-10 kms and seventeen percent travel between 10-18 kms for work. Fifteen percent work in close vicinity of the homes. Majority of the respondents travel by bus and depend on individual or shared autos to reach the work place. People staying in rural area come to city or residential complexes for better prospects.

Socio Economic Empowerment

Domestic workers in Kerala are privileged lot with a reasonably good wages of between Rs 400 to Rs 1200 on daily basis. A person who works in 4 households a day gets an average of Rs 600 per day. The rates vary from type of work, duration, need, time and so on. There is no one in the sample getting wage below Rs 300 per day. The female workers earn sufficiently enough to support the family. Ninety eight percent point out that they get special benefits in form of cash and also in kind during festivals or other occasions in the family.

The respondents feel that they are economically empowered as they are earning well to fully or partially support their family. Seventy eight percent points out they have saving. Though several of them have bank accounts (they operate it for government schemes), majority of them save through Chit funds, thirty five percent save money in form of gold for marriage of children. Only fifteen percent save in the form of bank deposits. They mainly approach cooperative banks as they find it difficult to go and deposit money in nationalized banks and also they are not accustomed to the formalities. Savings are mainly for education and marriage of children, constructing or repairing houses and so on.

Though seventy eight percent save, sixty nine percent point out they have debts. Twenty six point out that debts are mainly incurred from the local money lenders or other unorganized sources .Only nine percent have bank loans and twenty percent have gold loans. Debts were mainly incurred for marriage of children, education of children, repair of houses and treatment of kith and kin. They often end up paying a large amount of money as interest to the money lenders. Loans are often taken after mortgaging the house which they live. Seventy two indicates that they have the freedom to borrow from their employers and repay in instalments or pay by working freely. The respondents do believe that they have a positive role in decision making in the families. They take decision on children's education, purchase of durable goods and to a certain extent marriage of their children. Often the women turn out to be the

sole earners and decision makers in the family with the irresponsible attitude of the husbands. These female work forces are happy that they are capable of managing the family efficiently. The employment has made the life secure for around eighty three percent of the respondents.

Thirty one percent of the respondents are engaged in part time occupations like dairying, tailoring, sale of cloths and artificial jewellery to the surrounding houses through which they earn supplementary income. The womenfolk have strong social relations .They actively participate in family ceremonies and socio cultural activities in their neighborhood. They interact with other fellow workers in the locality and tries for better job prospects at other locations. Their main mode of entertainment is watching television. They do take the pleasure of going for films and for local festivals. Though they have limited opportunities to undertake tours for recreation they visit places for marriage of relatives or as part of pilgrimage. Seventy percent are proud of the rewards of their job and point out that they have the support of the husband and relatives in their activities. Eighty three percent are members of Kudumbasree, a social and economic initiative of Kerala and forty one have registered for MGNREGP and twelve are members of other local self help groups. None of them are members of any trade unions. Seventy one percent of the respondents do have their own house though all the houses are not pucca. Ninety six percent of the houses are equipped with electricity, toilets and water, four percent do not have availability of water at a close distance. Despite the fact that these women labourers are strong earning members of the family, only six percent have property in their name. Ninety seven percent respondents have a mobile phone. Ninety three percent of the families own television sets, forty percent have radio, thirty nine percent have refrigerators and eighty six percent have mixers in their houses. These durable goods are mainly acquired through installment schemes from vendors who visit the customer's homes. The labourers acquire utensils; spend money for shopping when they get bonus or extra payment especially on festive occasions.

Every respondent had their reason to continue working in this sector, eighty six percent points out that they are willing to work as long as health permits them. Ten percent prefers to work till debts are cleared and are settled in life. Four percent have not yet decided their future course of action. Only four percent have indicated their preference for other jobs. Only six percent of the workers wish to migrate to other countries in anticipation of better prospects. The respondents does not like the ideas of living their kith and kin and moving to far off areas though they would bring them more income and better living standards. The workers though they are engaged in this domestic work wish a better future for their children they expect them to have a safe future and to be engaged in other jobs even in unorganized sector with more dignity and better working conditions and less manual work.

Policy Implications

1. Labour laws should be redefined to include these domestic workers into its purview.
2. The workers should be provided with financial literacy- they can be encouraged to save or join insurance schemes for better future. Moreover they should be guided on the institutional sources of credit to avoid exploitation by the moneylenders.
3. Awareness programmes need to be organized on schemes available from the government to enable workers enjoy the social security benefits.

Conclusion

Though there is a increased tendency towards feminization of domestic work, Kerala provides better prospects for domestic workers compared to other parts of the country. They are better paid and are treated with due respect and supported by the employers. The working conditions are far better and the increased demand made it a high profile job. Even though the domestic workers are not bound by trade unions they are privileged to enjoy a good income and better status which encourages people working as agriculture labourers or as coolies in construction sector to move to this field. Better wages, social relations support from the employer, convenience motivates married women to be part of domestic workforce. The study reveals that the job as domestic workers has provided opportunities for unskilled women labour force. Though large number of in migrants is flowing to Kerala the households prefer natives for the job due to the security reasons and efficiency. With labour laws and social security benefits and financial literacy these workforce can scale greater heights to be part of strong force of much empowered women.

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