



The Condition of Migrant Women Domestic Workers under Urbanization in India: An Overview

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Introduction

In 2017, Zohra Bibi, a domestic worker in Mahagun Modern Society, Noida went ‘missing’ for a day; she was eventually found in the basement of her employer’s building. While the police framed it as a missing person’s case, Zohra claimed otherwise. According to her, she was beaten up by her employer for demanding a wage hike and was later locked in the basement by him. The employer accused her of stealing money. The news about the abusive treatment of Zohra Bibi spread in the slum where she was living and a militant protest was held by slum dwellers in front of the society complex where Zohra worked as a domestic worker. The residents of the society called the police who used harsh methods to shut down the protest, arresting thirteen protesters. Ironically, police closed Zohra Bibi’s case citing lack of evidence but continued its investigation in to the arrested protesters diverting the focus from the real issue.¹Zohra Bibi’s case shows the experiences of migrant domestic women workers in cities. It is evident that workers have no right to protest, express their anger or demand their rights. In the absence of dignity and justice for domestic women workers who are part of India’s informal economy, it is showing contradictory nature of urbanization and urban economy but at the same time against the ‘right to city’ and idea of ‘safe city’ becomes a challenge.

Paid domestic work is seen as “c”s that referred for “caring, cooking and cleaning” on the one hand and three “d”s, the result of migration, “dirty, dangerous and dull” on the other. This is a result of the general poverty or unemployment in the society, where workers are available for domestic work at cheap rates, coupled with busy lifestyles and large disposable income of middle class and rich people. Despite anti-migrant atmosphere and lack of proper laws for protection of the rights of domestic workers, women workers leave behind their roots in the villages and come to the cities to work where they face exploitation. With increasing migration at national level from rural to urban, that reality seems to be undergoing serious change. It is showing that resources and employment opportunities have been limited, especially under globalization. The problem is not only

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employment opportunity but major set of problems is the lack of recognition of migrants and their labours which urbanisation pose on them, especially on domestic workers who have little formal education indicates their poor socio-economic backgrounds.

Outsourcing of domestic and care work has been increasing since the last three decades. The paid domestic labour work can be seen as an extension of housework and calls for an understanding of locating the undervaluation and poor status of domestic workers within the devaluation of housework or domestic work and worker as significant labour and actors in the urban economy. Domestic labour is linked with both - agrarian distresses in rural areas and growth of informal sector in the urban areas. It indicates to the dualistic process of capitalist development, particularly in the era of globalization, where women are forced to join the informal labour market having domestic work as the only 'career' choice. It might appear as a job opportunity for rural poor migrant women; but it carries the legacy of devaluation of women's work within the household, as well as the legacy of slavery with its sexual divisions of labour. Nancy Fraser (2017) argued that unwaged social reproductive activity is necessary for the existence of wage work, the accumulation of surplus value, and the functioning of capitalism as such. Tithi Bhattacharya (2017) noted that women labour puts the system of capitalist production in motion, that labour power itself is the *sole* commodity. However, capitalism used women labour according to its own mechanism and convenience by process of exclusion and inclusion. The most interesting pattern is women came from all social groups, clearly indicating that gendered understanding of this work more sharply than other occupation. Neetha (2013) noted that the "Other Backward Classes (OBC) category accounted for the highest proportion (32%) followed by Scheduled Caste (SC) workers (31%) and Upper Castes (28%)" (Neetha, 2013, p. 35). However, women form the lowest ranks of the informal economy, despite the fact that the work they perform as a domestic labour – cooking, cleaning, caring etc. – is indispensable for humans to reproduce themselves.

Urbanization, the movement of the people from rural to urban areas and a change in their way of life, is a natural result of industrialization. It is widely accepted among scholars that urbanization is a process and it needs human labour along with advanced technology. David Harvey (1970) noted that the process of urbanization (city is representative of urbanization) is the backbone of the capitalist economy. According to him, a city is the centre of capital accumulation, power and privilege, and serves as the commercial interest, technological innovation and centre of revolution against exploitation and oppression. Logan and Molotch (1987) consider that market as a social phenomenon is not meant only for producers and consumers, but residents (including migrants) also use the city to "satisfy essential needs of life" (Logan and Molotch, 1987, p. 2).

Urbanization and migration cannot be understood without relating to the dynamics of gender, caste and household. Women labour migration is increasingly a means through which asymmetrical, intersecting relations pertaining to gender, caste and class are structured and negotiated. Dr. Ambedkar argued for the dalit community to move to cities, leaving behind the repressive village but when landless dalit peasantry moved to cities, they still experienced the repressive caste system and were forced to work in same type of occupations

in cities as well. For example, cleaning is considered a dirty and polluted work; mostly performed by dalit women domestic workers while workers from upper castes are often hired for cooking and caretaking of the household. In the absence of dignity, honour, social security and access to courts, it is not easy for domestic workers to demand paid leave, sick leave, minimum wage and bonus like other workers who are employed in industry or factory.

Framework and approach to understand the condition of Domestic workers

Most studies on migration that have contributed to our understanding about process of migration and gender in India come from research institutions. International Development Research Centre study shows that the conditions of women migrant workers are more vulnerable and they face violence and exploitation in the workplace than their male counterpart (IDRC and CRDI 2013). Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) talks about how the state is inefficient in identifying the domestic workers. CWDS (2012) survey report indicates the government statistics fails to grasp the complexity of both the scale and motives of women who migrate from rural to urban areas. The NSSO data include two reasons for women's migration within India: (a) marriage, with women relocating to join the household of their husband or (b) associational migration where women move as members of a migrating family. CWDS raises significant concerns that official figure excludes large numbers of migrants (men and women) who migrate on a temporary basis, short term, internal migration, medium term and circular migrations. Temporary labour migration in India includes short-term (less than a year, including those who move for seasonal work), medium-term (for a period of up to two years) and circular migration (without any long-term workplace or residence at any particular destination and with return to origin for more than a month per year). With increasing migration at a national level from the rural to the megacities, that reality seems to be undergoing serious changes.

Sen and Sen in their article '*Bargaining over Wages: Part-time Domestic Workers in Kolkata*' (2013) writes on complication of domestic work and standardisation of wages that is a result of the ideology of feminine domesticity which is performed within familial space. It creates problem for formulating and effective functioning as an occupation and collective action. They argued that the same difficulty is with traditional trade union that organise feminised labour in informal contexts and domestic workers who are organizing themselves as workers. They argued that supply of labour and negotiation of the wage are influenced by ideologies of feminine domesticity. Domestic workers negotiate wage and non-wage facility at personal level as State has not provided any mechanism. Wage rates and other non-wage benefits, they have explained as products of "pragmatic intimacy" cultivated overtime both by employers and workers. Combined with the gendered nature of this occupation, they highlight the complete absence of social security (or alternative fallback options) which constrains the formation of collective institutions, thereby paving the way for individual negotiations.

A similar view is found in '*Organising Domestic Workers in Pune City*' in which the dimensions of exclusion of domestic workers from established trade unionism, the reluctance and discomfort in accepting domestic

workers as “workers”, alternative approaches to unionising and the specific experiences in organising and the specificities of work are addressed by Sonia and Moghe (2013).

Neetha N. in her essay ‘*Paid Domestic Work: Making Sense of the Jigsaw Puzzle*’ (2013) writes on domestic work in India and defines that domestic workers undertake diverse tasks, including housecleaning, laundry, cooking, dishwashing, care of children and the elderly, shopping, fetching and dropping children from /to school, and other activities associated with the regular and smooth functioning of a family household. Urban middle class mostly preferred part time domestic worker because of its being cheap labour, need no responsibility and can be easily hired and fired. Along with that Neetha also analyses the social background (lower caste) of domestic workers who are employed in cleaning tasks, while workers from upper castes women are hired for cooking. In this context, caste system is remaining in urban areas through their jobs. In the context of caste, the tribal woman domestic worker is an important development to understand how caste system in India remains intact through domestic work. However, it is difficult to identify statistics of ratio of lower and upper caste women who are engaged in domestic work in India. S. Srinivasan and Ilango Ponnuswami (2014) noted that living condition of women domestic workers are a neglected group among the unorganized sector. For decades they have been exploited and only in recent years NGOs are taking up the cause of women domestic workers. They focused on educational backwardness, health, security issues of domestic worker in Tiruchirapalli District of Tamil Nadu.

Kamla Sankaran (2013) points out that the legislative protection for domestic worker has focused unduly on labour laws and wage rates, ignoring the valuation of unpaid care and domestic labour performed by women in the household. A consequence of such a lack of recognition of unpaid labour is the effect it has on determination of wage rates for domestic works. She provides critical analysis of state policies and regulation of domestic work alongside specific issues of legal intervention. She analyses the existing legislations as well as the broad framework of labour laws and women rights. She put forth interesting argument that how state policies and market use social understanding of domestic work into labour market without extension of labour rights and without taking into account the specificity of work and workers in the sector. It creates complexities in both senses. The social understanding of domestic work is not recognised or undermines the housework that is mainly performed by women. It is more difficult for domestic workers who struggle for better wages in India. She suggests scientific methods of revaluation of household work will not only push for higher wages for domestic workers but also help in the recognition of women rights.

Sujata Gothoskar (2013) argues that the increasing of domestic work is part of the global division of labour. Migration for domestic work is an opportunity in the absence of social protection, leading worst and more vulnerable situation of the workers. She noted that the contradiction of domestic work and domestic workers face various problems in the light of multiple hierarchies in un-protective and unprivileged conditions in general across the world and some peculiar problems with Indian domestic workers. She also considers that the relationship of the domestic employer-employee within the context of absence of state intervention and lack of legal protection.

Conclusion

Zohra Bibi's experiences showing the process of urbanization mediated by the complex social socio-economic relation and inequality between privileged and powerless on the one hand and issues, concerns, and demands of domestic workers on the other. It is clear that domestic work is primarily concerned with the issues of wage, nature of domestic work, social security, basic facilities and lack of government data and statistic on domestic worker in particular and migration in general in India. Domestic work is usually connected with the policy frameworks and facilities of the city, social reproduction and sexual division of labour. That means domestic workers have to work in unsafe environment, lack of legal protection, low wages and often precarious employment in cities. The push factors for domestic workers are rooted in market economy and crisis in agricultural sector that growing insecurity and insecure employment. Other significant dimension is involved this sector such as easy availability, the easy entry, no need formal qualification and skill and domestic workers is perceived to be less strenuous and important labour than manual labour. And most important aspects from domestic workers point of view that they are able to maintain work and home, including looking family and small children. The rising demands for domestic workers is located in the increase informalization of labour under the process of urbanization on the one hand and have no other opportunity for rural uneducated women who are participating in large scale in the informal labour are serious challenge for the concept of safe and right to the city to everyone.

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