



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

A study on the impact of Covid-19 lock down on women domestic workers in Bangalore city- A Sociological study

Thirumalesha Babu. T. R

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology,
Government First Grade College, Koratagere
Tumkur-572 129, Karnataka.

Abstract:

Women constitute almost 50% of the India's population, their number was 586.5 million as per 2011 census report. To be more precise, women represent 48.5 % of India's population. Women's contribution to economic development is immense both in visible and invisible form. From being primarily a vehicle of human reproduction to a vehicle of social, cultural and economic good, she can create wonders. Despite this, the fact is that they have been most abused and have undergone with various types of hardships in their day to day life. The women domestic workers come under the realm of unorganized group, who strived to make their living without any life security and are in the vulnerable conditions of their social life. Their socio economic condition is very poor and they belong to the lower strata of the society. Featured with insecurity, illiteracy, high indebtedness, these women constitute a major chunk of the work force who, most of the time goes unaccounted. Even though the government of India has implemented several policies aiming at their social security, most of them have to come into reality. According to a recent survey conducted by an NGO (2018) based in Karnataka, there are around four million women domestic workers in Bangalore city alone. These women domestic workers are doing the drudgery of washing, cleaning, cooking and all tedious tasks in other households for their own survival. Long hours of work, years of toil often with no standard wage policy, no rest or recreation, many times vulnerable to sexual harassment, abuse of their dignity, untouchability, often treated cruelly are the common stories of their lives. There have been many cases of rape and murder, horror tales of being beaten up brutally, locked in bathrooms, bitten and in few instances being burnt by employers. Their condition, which is bad, went from bad to worse, due to Covid-19 lock down, which was implemented by the Government from 24th March 2020 to 14th April 2020. This three week lock down was inevitable to break the infectious cycle of Corona virus. As the first lockdown period approached to an end, many state governments and other advisory committees recommended extending the lockdown period. The governments of Odisha and Punjab extended the state lock down until 1st May. Other states such as Maharashtra, Karnataka, West Bengal and Telangana followed suit. On 14th April, Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended the

nationwide lockdown until 3rd May, with conditional relaxations after 20th April for the regions where the spread had been contained or was minimal. On 1st May, the Government of India extended the nationwide lockdown further by two weeks until 17th May. On 17th May, the lockdown was further extended till 31st May by the National Disaster Management Authority. Therefore, this 45 days lock down, has completely shattered and ravaged the lives of people, especially Domestic workers. With no job, no income, the lives of domestic workers was totally destroyed. Already their condition was bad, it went from bad to worse. With larger job cuts, the spending capacity of the people was taken for toss. This paper makes an attempt to highlight some of the vital condition and drudgery faced by the women domestic help during the Covid-19 lock down.

Key Words: Women domestic help, development, socio and economic conditions, exploitation.

Introduction:

According to a recent survey conducted by an NGO (2018) based in Karnataka, there are around four million women domestic workers in Bangalore city alone. Out of 20 million women domestic help, 92% of them are women or girls, who are middle aged and 20% of them are children, who are below the age of 14 and 25% are between 15 and 20. All kinds of work for all domestic workers are arbitrary and based on very individual, personalized relationships. Woven into these relationships are personal stories, woman to woman dealings and also factors of loyalty, gratitude, helplessness.

Domestic workers can be broadly classified as part timers, full timers, residential or live in domestic workers. This also includes those working in defense and government quarters. They can also be classified based on the tasks that they do such as those who do only cleaning works, only cooking, childcare or care of the elderly. Very often, these tasks or the division of labour, are highly determined by caste domain. In most cases, the tasks are not clearly defined by the employer, leading to exploitation. According to the Report on Working Condition of Domestic Servants by the Ministry of Labour, Government of India, nearly 90 per cent of domestic workers are women. According to the National Survey conducted by the School of Social Work, women constituted 87.09 % of Domestic Workers in Karnataka.

The most frequent problem of domestic workers are long working hours, little or no wages, poor food or consumption of stale food, lack of personal freedom, no weekly leave or casual leave, getting blamed for damage or loss of articles - fines and possible criminal charges. Physical and sexual abuse is often an integral part of their life. There are many reported cases of exploitation, discrimination, sexual abuse, unfair treatment etc. and the greatest abuse done to domestic workers is carried out in the houses of those rich enough to live behind closed doors so neighbors do not easily find out what goes on inside. Unless there are grave violations, like throwing hot water or burning with a hot pressing iron, the media do not investigate cases abuse of domestic workers thoroughly. Some NGOs try to help domestic workers, but it is very difficult to organize them, especially the child workers. Their employers do not allow them to go out or to “waste time” on schooling. They do not want domestic problems to leak out and they do not want the workers to become aware of their rights. For the employers, ignorance of their employees, is definitely a bliss.

Social Condition of Domestic Help in Bangalore:

Besides the economic drudgery the domestic workers face, they also are socially discriminated. Caste dominated attitudes prevail in many of the employer's houses, where separate glass and plate is kept. They are not allowed to enter the pooja room, nor drink filter water, nor use the toilet. This outlook of pollution stems from the fact that most of the workers are from the scheduled caste or Dalit community. The practice is such that in many homes after the worker washes the clothes or vessels, the employer again rinses with drops of water as an act of purification. The domestic worker, many a times work for long hours but hardly will be provided with food or tea or coffee. Many of the employers forget that the domestic workers are also humans, have families to take care of, live in deplorable conditions, face health problems and have the same kind of pressures and problems like them. Cases of sexual harassment also happen, but many are silent about it and employers ignore and often blame the women. The domestic workers are sometimes treated as criminals and are blamed for any theft in the employer's house. The above plight of domestic workers prevails all over the country, with variations according to region, locality, class and caste' of employers. The domestic workers are also caught in the caste conundrum. There are examples of women following the division of labour very strictly. Some of the women depending on their position in the caste hierarchy do only cooking and not cleaning, while others may do all the cleaning except the toilets and while there are some who do not enter the kitchen. The instances continues.

WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN BANGALORE: A SCENARIO

Globalisation has contributed positively to migration flow all over the world and the flow of temporary migrant workers from all parts of the world to all directions is increasing. With this the movement of unskilled women workers from developing countries to developed countries, and from underdeveloped regions to most developed cities and towns is a common phenomenon, in which most of them migrate for occupations such as domestic work.

Bangalore is one of the fastest growing cities of the world. Due to the overall development of the city in all directions, people do migrate from different states and union territories of our country for the sake of professional jobs in industries, software, service sector and for other types of business deals. In the same way the uneducated, unskilled people will also migrate to city of Bangalore to undertake menial jobs in the informal sector, namely, construction industry, to work as domestic workers and to undertake other low paid jobs. Any calamity either natural or otherwise in and around Bangalore, will bring in lot of people to Bangalore in search of menial jobs in the unorganised sector. In the process, they earn low wages and tolerate harsh working conditions. Domestic workers probably form one of the most vulnerable groups.

Broadly there are two systems of domestic workers in the city of Bangalore. Namely, the live-in and the live-outs. Among live-out's, again there are two types i.e. Full Time and Part Time Domestic Workers. Live-in maids are full-timers, who stay either in the servant quarters or within the house of the employer. The live-outs are those domestic helpers, who report at their employer's house in the morning and return to their homes in the evening. In these live outs, there are Full time domestic workers, who work throughout the day in a single house. They stay since morning to evening. Whereas the part-time domestic workers are those who work in different houses for 2-3 hours.

Review of Literature:

Afadameh Amah, Kalula Evance (2013) stated that domestic work is correlated to informal employment and this put domestic worker outside the scope of formal employment in most cases. This makes legislative framework deficient to properly regulate the sector, it concurrently leaves domestic workers exploited. Therefore, an essential step in the attainment of social justice for abused and exploited domestic workers lies in their ability to unionize, receive information and understand their rights.

UN Report (2013) stated that Millions of domestic workers around the world are not protected under general labour laws and are highly vulnerable to exploitation which calls on countries to extend social protection to them. Domestic workers are frequently expected to work longer hours than other workers and in many countries do not have the same rights to weekly rest that are enjoyed by other workers. Combined with the lack of rights, the extreme dependency on an employer and the isolated and unprotected nature of domestic work can render them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Domestic work discharged either by the women or by children in any form is also included unorganized labour. Domestic workers are deprived of constitutional guarantees. Domestic workers are the most neglected class of labour as they are rarely seen and seldom heard by legal scholars. Yet, domestics are amongst a group of workers which are the most exploited by their employers or the least protected by the law. The system of domestic labor shows a prevalence of low wages, long hours and difficult working conditions. There is a need for granting legal protection to domestic workers (Majid, 2000:19).

The child domestic labour force is also increasing in the country despite the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986. Domestic work includes mental, manual and emotional aspects, including care work that is necessary to maintain people and communities (Anderson 2000:01). Domestic workers have increased in India mainly due to increased female labour force participation, increased income and purchasing power amongst urban populations and emergence of nuclear family units in urban areas. The demand for domestic help across Indian cities has increased over a period of time in the age of economic liberalization. Domestic work is viewed as reproductive work that creates not only labour units but also people and social relations. The increase in the number of domestic workers is often viewed as 'feminization of labour' (Kanji and Menon, 2001:15).

The women domestic workers are normally treated with respect by the employers. The employers scold them in times of any delay or discrepancy in the work. They are not allowed to cultivate good human relations with the neighbors. They find it very difficult to report sexual harassment at workplaces and are forced to remain silent due to power dynamics and fear of discrimination or dismissal (Gupta and Hajra, 2007:10).

The relationship between employers and domestic workers is very subjective and depended on the individuals involved. This increase in the number of domestic workers is linked to a shift from agrarian-based economy to a manufacture and service-based economy. There is a marginal increase in the number of women domestic workers in India (Rustagi, 2009:31). The employer-employee relationship is a complex one and is viewed as one of domination, dependency and inequality (Ray and Qayum, 2009:29).

Objectives of the study:

- To Study the Socio- Economic conditions of the Female Domestic Workers in Bangalore city.
- To find out the challenges and problems of Female Domestic Workers
- To find out the socio and economic conditions of domestic workers in Bangalore
- To Understand the impact of Covid-19 Lock down on the lives of Domestic workers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Locale of the study: The scope of the study was limited to selected localities of Bangalore - three areas are chosen for the study, namely Banashankari, Jayanagar, Basavanagudi. The selection of these residential clusters was based on the ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds of the workers gathered through the initial mapping of various localities.

Sample Size: The study is based on the household survey of 150 domestic workers in these settlements. Women constitute the major chunk of part-time domestic workers in Bangalore.

In the case of domestic work there exists a strong preference for female workers. Much more than the issue of femininity attached to the jobs, it is the security considerations of the employer households, which makes the occupation largely female dominated. The degree of femininity is found to vary across operations, within domestic service. Household cleaning, especially, washing utensils and clothes are found to have a strong degree of femininity, while cooking and marketing are perceived as jobs with some degree of masculinity. Domestic service is also influenced by the social and cultural notions on the appropriateness of type of workers for particular work pushing the socially backward migrants into domestic service.

Changes in the monthly consumption expenditure of the respondents before and during lock down in the selected areas

Income group	< 2500		2501-5000		5001-7500		Total
	Before	During	Before	During	Before	During	
Banashankari	8	19	5	12	37	19	50
Jayanagar	6	17	13	15	31	18	50
Basavanagudi	9	16	12	18	29	16	50
Total	23	52	30	45	97	53	150

Source: Primary Data

Inference:

Due to lack of job security and social security benefits, the exploitation is very high in the domestic workers sector. This has resulted in long working hours, unsatisfactory working conditions and occupational health hazards. The working conditions are not safe. Unawareness and lack of proper rules and policies makes the workers feel insecure. Domestic workers, in general, experience certain specific health problems, due to extensive use of fertilizers, insecticides and pesticides and mechanization. The lives of domestic workers, which was already bad, went from bad to worse, due to Covid-19 lock down enforced by the government of

India. With no job and income, their life was totally shattered and destroyed. The data evidence proves this fact. This depicts depletion of standard or quality of living of unorganized workers. To explore the possibilities and fact, a hypothesis has been formulated and paired t-test was conducted on the collected data to test the hypothesis.

Findings of the study:

- Most of the domestic workers are basically migrated workers. Most of them have migrated from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh to Bangalore.
- Their average daily working hours is 3 to 4 hours and they work in 3 to 4 hours on daily basis.
- Most of them are unaware of their rights and legislative protections to them.
- Most of them are illiterate and only few of them have done their primary education.
- Only few respondents could sign their name and rest were affixing their left hand thumb impressions.
- They are subject to work place exploitation and abuse by their employers.
- Their savings capacity was very poor and hardly they save anything out of their earning.

Conclusions:

Millions of domestic workers around the world are not protected under general labour laws and are highly vulnerable to exploitation. Domestic workers are frequently expected to work longer hours. Broadly there are two systems of domestic workers in the city of Bangalore. Viz, the live-in and the live-outs. Live-in maids are full-timers, who stay either in the servant quarters or within the house of the employer. The live-outs are those domestic helpers, who report at their employer's house in the morning and return to their homes in the evening.

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