



An Analysis on the Plight of Domestic Workers During COVID-19 Pandemic, 2020-A Case Study in Guwahati City

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has left severe impact on livelihood and social safety net on the women domestic workers. They have faced a total or near unemployment and economic insecurities due to social distancing and lockdown restrictions majority of whom are women. Being least organised and lacking institutional support, domestic workers are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and human rights violations, and the pandemic has aggravated the situation. Surveys were conducted with 120 domestic workers from Guwahati city only with focus on working conditions, livelihood and household dynamics, health scenario and state support during the pandemic. The data was substantiated with qualitative inputs from in-depth interviews conducted. In the results, widespread job loss is reported among domestic workers during March–June 2020 along with drastically reduced income and increased workload. About 57% domestic workers reported stigma and discrimination at workplace, and 40% worked without any safety measures. Incidence of domestic violence at home, increased work burden at home, issues in access to health care, etc., were reported. The study findings point out the urgent need to have a national-level policy and state support specifically targeting women domestic workers, without which the situation of poverty, health hazards and social exclusion will continue to exist.

Key Words: Domestic worker, International Labour Organisation, lockdown, COVID-19,

Guwahati.

Introduction

Currently we are facing a global crisis due to outbreak of COVID-19. The whole world is being alarmed by the deadly pandemic widespread all over the World. Developed Countries like India is facing the alarming situation due to COVID-19 pandemic. The infected cases increased alarmingly. The most affected areas are mostly slums due to high concentration of population. Across the social classes in India, very challenging and crucial situations are facing every year due to outbreak of pandemic. The global economy came to a standstill with countries announcing partial or complete lockdown resulting unprecedented social and economic distress to the world population. India's Gross Domestic Product growth was already slowing down and unemployment was also rise. While the pandemic has affected livelihoods, the employment protection and social security of those in the informal sector who constitute 86% of the workforce stands most affected as they struggle to meet the basic necessities as well as the threat of infection (ILO,2013a). Though different groups of workers are going through similar constraints in terms of livelihood and social safety net, the women domestic workers faced total or near unemployment and economic insecurities due to social distancing and lockdown restrictions

A domestic worker is a person who is hired to carry out household chores in the employer's home or to perform cleaning duties in an apartment building. Domestic workers perform duties such as sweeping, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, cooking, caring of children, dusting and wiping shelves and other furniture, cleaning of toilet/rooms, doing the laundry and ironing etc. which are carried out for an employer in remuneration. Domestic work provides an important livelihood source for illiterate women or those with very little education. The country's official National Sample Survey estimates that there are 4.2 million domestic workers in India , while the International Labour Organisation (ILO) notes the real figure is likely to be higher. Globally, ILO estimates there are at least 67 million domestic workers over the age of 15 worldwide, 80% of whom are women. (ILO2013b). The ILO also estimates that the number of child domestic worker who are between 5-14 years old at 11.2 million globally. (ILO2013c). The ILO report of April/2020 mention that economic crisis generated from the pandemic and the Government's response to it was most likely to push 40 crores informal workers into absolute poverty including 20 crores women domestic workers. The women work as part-time or stay-at-home domestic workers, and their household expenses are predominantly met through the income they earn. In spite of the large worker population, domestic work is not recognised as 'work' and is always treated as the lowest in the occupation hierarchy. This structural issue of injustice where the society deny recognition of the domestic workers as 'workers' have left them at the mercy of their employers (Chandramouli, 2018).

People in domestic workers are one of the most vulnerable categories of workers. In India they are part of unregulated, informal sector, hidden from view in private houses. They have no legal protection as workers under India's labour law, which do not recognize domestic work under limited social protection. Most of them socially discriminated populations which are the part of "other backward classes" category and have

migrated to cities from poor rural areas. Common features such as long and unregulated working hours, confinement, physical violence, sexual assault, under payment or no payment are the characteristics of the domestic workers. Many are victims of human trafficking, recruited to cities through agents who charge placement commission.

The most challenging problems that has been surfacing for the domestic workers since COVID-19 induced lockdown. This impact in their socio-economic vulnerability. According to a conservative estimate at least 85 per cent workers have not received their wages during lockdown. (ILO2021). With the frequent lockdowns, domestic workers are now being confronted with increased hardships and financial challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the precious nature of their marginalization and the urgent need to address the situation. The unemployment rate is worst in urban areas since alternative livelihood options are scarce than the rural settings.

The social and economic distress faced by domestic workers across the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic, added to the existing inequities and right violations especially in urban areas. In Mumbai, many domestic workers from slum areas working in the upper middle-class houses of the neighborhood were sent back on unpaid leave amidst the lockdown (Parth, 2020). In Delhi, domestic workers complained of reduced wages and non-payment during March–April 2020 and later joblessness. Those who were not listed in the ration registry based on 2011 census and migrant labourers were left out from public provisioning (Goel et al., 2020; Yadav, 2020).

A report in the Decan Herald mention that with the loss of jobs, domestic workers have been facing difficulties to avail basic amenities such as paying rent for their accommodation, water and buying food items. The Mumbai Mirror report dtd 7th September/2020 noted that 24percent domestic workers in Maharastra lost their jobs permanently whereas 76 percent lost their jobs temporarily. The imposition of sudden lockdown left the domestic workers to awake up with no job and strict monitoring by the housing societies in entry and exit of outsiders, majority of domestic workers were left without any means of receiving wage from their works.

In Assam, in particular, the plight of domestic workers has adversely changed since the lockdown. Although the government has provided free ration, many of them had been deprived of these facilities. According to a survey conducted by the Centre for Development Initiative (CDI) Guwahati less than 50 per cent domestic workers have received free ration. While the informal sector workers faced the most adverse impact of the COVId-19 pandemic and resultant lockdown. Guwahati city is the capital of the Assam state and the corridor of all the North Eastern States.The city is surrounded by slums and inhabitants are mostly women domestic workers and mostly their husbands are working in private organisations. The socio-economic condition of the domestic workers are either worsening or has already worsened.

Considering the universality of the structural inequities faced by the domestic workers and the significance of having a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in the context of the pandemic, a study was undertaken to develop a comprehensive outline of the constraints faced by domestic workers. The study attempted to assess the situation of domestic workers in relation to changed working conditions, livelihood and family dynamics and also to document the state support systems in place to address the issues. The study outcome is expected to have policy implications towards addressing the experience of social exclusion of domestic workers from the state welfare framework and also towards tackling the existing systemic labour right violations.

Objective of the Study:

1. To understand the present socio-economic condition of the domestic workers
2. To understand the plight of the domestic workers in Guwahati city during COVID-19 Pandemic

Methodology:

The study adopted mixed methodology of quantitative and qualitative tools. Interview schedule was developed and used to collect response from primary respondents-domestic workers. Data collection was carried from the middle of the July to the end of the August/ 2020 through personal interviews. Due to pandemic, it was not possible to collect data/ information outside Guwahati city. No scientific sampling technique was used for the assessment of domestic workers. An effort was applied to reach out maximum domestic workers (around 120) to collect the data/ information. Due to lockdown many domestic workers could not be reached out on time and all do not have mobile phone. So we approached several times to reach them .The survey focused on socio-demographic details, working conditions, employer-worker relationships, impact of the pandemic on livelihood and family conditions, health care and state support systems for the workers during the pandemic situation

Data Analysis:

A. Status of the surveyed Domestic workers

In the age wise categorisation, majority of the respondents belonged to 41–50 years (25.5%), 31–40 years (22.5%) and 21–30 years (19.5%). The age group of the rest of the respondents belonged to 51–59 years (15.8%), 15–20 years (10%) and 60–65 years (6.7%). Among the respondent domestic workers, 74% were migrants (predominantly from a rural village to the city) while the rest (26%) were natives The interdistrict analysis of the respondents showed that Darrang district has the most number (55) of migrant domestic workers followed by Nalbari (42), while it was the lowest (23) in Morigaon district.

The findings of 120 respondents (Domestic workers) are presented in Table 1.01

Table 1.01 General status of the Domestic workers

Sl No	Item	Description	Percentage
1	Sex	Female	98
2	Marital status	Married	75
3	Schooling	Did not	40
4	School type	Government	93
5	Reasons for discontinuation of studies	Poverty	72
6	Purpose of work	Livelihood	88
7	Employment	Part time	73
8	Contractual	Oral	99
9,	Payment frequency	Monthly	96
10	Salary deduction due to absence	Yes	88
11	Access to medical facilities	No	72
13	Religion	Muslim	53

It can be observed that majority respondents identified as female. (98 Per cent). Almost 72 per cent respondents cited poverty as the main cause for the discontinuation of the study. The majority of the respondents indicated that they started work only for better livelihood. The most common caste representative was OBC (36 per cent) followed by Scheduled Tribe (28%), Scheduled Caste (24%)and general (12%). The expenses of attending school was met by the majority of the respondents themselves(65%). Guardian or employer met the expenses for education by29 per cent and 6 per cent respectively for the respondents. . The most common reason for discontinuation education was poverty (72 Per cent). Due to loss financial support on account of death of earning member is also one of the major reasons for discontinuation of study, About 18 per cent of the respondents identified marriage as the reason for leaving education.

About 77% were working as part-time and 23% were working full-time. Out of 120, 52 % worked for more than six hours a day, whereas 23% worked for 3–5 hours followed by another 25% who worked for less than three hours. About 82% worked in multiple houses whereas 18% worked only in one house. About 78% were engaged in cleaning tasks, followed by 5.7% in child rearing help during office hours and 16.2% were involved in cooking–cleaning together. It was seen that 24.6% of them travelled more than 30 minutes to reach the workplace, covering distance of more than 10 km.

Work status:

During the survey, it was found that the number of years spent as domestic workers, 51.3% for the last 1–5 years, 20.4% have served 6–10 years and 22.5% have completed 11–15 years. Of the rest 3% have spent 16–20 years, 3.5% have spent 21–25 years, 2.1% have spent 26–30 years and 0.7% between 31 and 35 years. Those who have changed their jobs very frequently gave reasons for this. (Table 1.02)

Table 1.02 Reasons for change of jobs

Sl no	Reasons	Percentage
1	Family problem	15
2	Marriage	17
3	Distance from the residence	36
4	Medical issue	12
5	Looking for better job opportunities	10
6	Termination of previous job employer	5
7	Behavior of the employer	5

Livelihood status:

Before COVID-19 pandemic affected their livelihood, 62% reported a monthly income of Rs 5,001–7,500 followed by 22% having a monthly income of ₹ 1,000–5,000. Only 12% had a monthly income between ₹ 7501–10,000. Of the rest 4% reported a monthly income between ₹ 10,001–15,000 . Majority of the respondents (95%) did not avail minimum wages for the works done. Only 5% were paid their salaries as per the minimum wages rate , and their wages were revised once in a year. It was also seen that 95% of the domestic workers did not have access to PPF/NPS type savings and are outside the bracket of security measures. Even before the pandemic times only 5% of the workers availed PPF/contributory savings, the reason being they were recruited through placement agencies. . A good majority (77.3%) did not have membership in any associations working to ensure social security of domestic workers.

Impact of lockdown

The pandemic has made both short-term and long-term impact on the families of the domestic workers

A. Continuation of work during lockdown

Out of 120 respondents, only 25 (21 per cent) mentioned that they attended the work regularly during lockdown. Others reported that they did not attend the duties during lockdown.

B. Salary disbursement during lockdown

Out of 120 respondents 65 (54%) reported having received salary during the lockdown while the rest 55 (46%) had not received salary during lockdown.

C. Pattern of salary disbursement during lockdown

Among those who reported receiving salary during lockdown mentioned that 55% domestic workers were receiving full salary and the rest 45 % received half of their salary.

D. Relief package and financial support

Relief distribution during lockdown was carried by the NGOs and private organizations. Only 95 (80 %) respondents reported that they had received relief packages from the NGOs and private individuals during lockdown.

E. Financial assistance from the Government through bank linkage

During the survey it was observed that only 40% domestic workers received financial assistance from the Government through bank linkage. Some of them were unaware about the financial assistance as well as they do not have any bank account in their names.

F. Assistance from the Government in food items

It was reported that all the domestic workers received assistance in kind in the form of food items through fair price shops at the time of lockdown.

G. Payment of house rent and other facilities

The major short-term impact of the pandemic is reported as difficulty in payment of rents (48%) and withering away of savings (53%). For 34% of the families, food intake got restricted whereas for another 10%, there is no diversification in the food basket. Debts increased for 33% of the families and more than 11% families were forced to sell their personal assets for survival. Long-term impact of COVID was also probed for which the respondents reported increase in job insecurity (34%), increase in financial insecurity (32.8%) and stress in marital relationships (33.2%) as major long-term impacts.

H. Household dynamics:

Household dynamics of the families of domestic workers have changed drastically during the pandemic. The respondents reported increase in domestic violence (34%), increase in household workload (32%), increase of stress in marital relationship (22.2%) and loss of self-respect due to job loss (11.8%). The emotional and psychological issues faced in the family due to job loss along with financial constraints have made life more stressful for the domestic workers. During the qualitative enquiry, half of the women reported that domestic violence has increased during the pandemic. This includes emotional and physical abuse as well as sexual violence. In many cases husbands were unemployed but they stayed outside the house most of the time. Now due to movement restrictions all family members remain at home most of the time. All the family members staying together the whole day (four to eight members in one or two rooms) in congested living conditions causes increased workload, strife and privacy issues in the household, especially affecting women. Taking care of children who remain at home for the whole day also is an added concern for many women. All the women said that their quality of life deteriorated which they expressed as time available for rest and recreation with social interaction.

I. Health Issues and Health Care

The study tried to analyse the mental and physical health issues faced by the domestic workers and the access to health care facilities during the pandemic. It was important to note that, more than 85% of the domestic workers reported anxiety as a mental health condition. Amongst 120 domestic workers 34% had severe anxiety that their sleep patterns got highly disturbed and another 21.6% reported that they sometimes feel anxious). During the period of the pandemic, 35.3% of the domestic workers had health issues for self/family member which required medical consultation. In this category 66.3% had to

discontinue treatment of the illness. The major reasons pointed out for discontinuation of treatment are unaffordability, lack of transportation and absence of outpatient services in Government hospitals. Four workers during interview said that regular medical follow up of their children were stopped due to financial constraints.

Key findings from the data analysis

1. It was observed that 88 per cent domestic workers were from marginalized social group . this include OBC, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe.
2. Poor working conditions were identified. The vast majority workers headed by oral contracts (99%). A majority had no weekly holidays or annual leave. (90%). A majority had no access to medical services (72%).
3. There is a distinct demographic for domestic workers—demographic workers in the sample were typically married women with at least one child.
4. Poverty seems to be inhabiting education. Only they attended schooling up to middle class.

Policy recommendation

1. **Registration of domestic workers as workers**—Domestic workers have no legal protection as workers under India's labour law which do not recognize domestic workers as worker. The state government should open their registration provision to domestic workers and provide labour cards.
2. **Fixation of minimum wages for domestic workers**—Wage would ensure dignity of work. Welfare Board should be constituted to monitor and implementation of minimum wages.
3. Inclusion of domestic worker through social security scheme.
4. **Skill training**—Introduction of skill training would help to ensure respect and dignity to domestic workers as profession. The NGOs may come forward for develop and promote skill training.

Summary & Conclusion

Currently we are facing a global crisis due to outbreak of COVID-19. The whole world is being alarmed by the deadly pandemic widespread all over the world. The global pandemic scenario and the ensuing vulnerabilities have aggravated and reinforced the social, cultural, economic and political inequities surrounding women engaged in domestic labour. The pandemic has resulted in the emergence of new forms of rights violations and situations of social injustice among the informal workforce, Characterized by termination of jobs/non-payment of wages/salaries, workload, health risks, indebtedness, poor access to health care, violence, stigmatization and humiliation, unmet food/education/health requirements of the family, etc. Ignorance of citizenship as well as labour rights, digital gap and poor literacy, and unorganised nature of the workforce facilitates the open practice of rights violations against domestic workers contributing to universality of experiences and systemic injustice. At the same time, contextual variations in social injustice based on structural factors and state support systems also needs to be understood.

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