



# Unfolding The Harsh Realities Of Part-Time Domestic Work: A Study Conducted Among The Female Domestic Workers Of Kerala

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## Abstract

In India, women account for almost one-third of the working population. The majority of these women are employed in unorganized and informal sectors of the economy, such as construction, agriculture, and domestic labor. The bulk of workers in the domestic services sector are, in particular, women and young girls. The current study intends to empirically investigate the nature of labor interactions between paid domestic workers and their employers as perceived by the former. It attempts to take a closer look at the general working conditions of domestic workers as well as the issues and challenges they encounter on a daily basis. Further, the research aims to eventually examine how the life trajectories of female part-time, live-out domestic workers are built by focusing on their nature of employment arrangements and experiences in workplace conditions. The study largely contextualizes domestic work relations in India as a domain of continuing and ongoing power struggle, drawing extensively from feminist theory. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fifteen female domestic workers from Kerala's Thiruvananthapuram district, the researcher sought to realistically illustrate how the world of domestic work still remains an extremely unequal, deeply structured, and intricately stratified terrain characterized by the intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and religion.

**Keywords:** Domestic worker, female, labor, gender, caste, class, discrimination

## 1. Introduction

Domestic work, both paid and unpaid, has long sparked passionate discussions in the fields of gender studies and women's studies, particularly in relation to the Western context. In her 2003 study, Moors persuasively claimed that academic research on paid domestic employment has not been a substantial area of study. However, the goal of this study is to challenge that notion. It aims to provide a case for the relevance and significance of paid domestic employment in India, especially in light of the caste, class, and gender strata that it is embedded in.

The primary units of social organization are seen to be households (Hendon 1996, 48). In this sense, domestic activities that occur in the scope of households have significant socio-political and economic significance and are basically inextricable from the public sphere. Family relationships are neither separate from society as a whole, nor are the changes they go through totally external to or apart from societal developments. In this situation, Marxist feminists would contend that paid domestic labor should be viewed as a crucial part of the social system of reproduction (Romero 2002, 60). The primary paid domestic work carried out by women in India is essential to the smooth operation of middle-class households and the preservation of their gender dynamics. Therefore, any effort to legalize paid domestic employment might have a significant influence on the vast majority of Indian employees who work in these households.

The hierarchies created by class, caste, gender, and other factors in the stratified Indian society are typically taken into account in studies like this one that aim to explain the nature of domestic labor relations. Domestic services offer the most ideal arena to undertake inquiries on the development and functioning of class connections and identities, as Dickey (2003) rightly noted in his research. It is a setting where class ineluctably reproduces itself and new difficulties are created based on class in a distinctly personal way. Therefore, any research that aims to comprehend the subtleties of domestic labor relations as they emerge in the workplace needs to be well-informed by knowledge of the structural injustices and discrimination that are prominent in Indian society.

Dickey (2002), Ray and Qayum (2009), and other researchers have shown how essential paid domestic labor is in the Indian setting and how it has also become customary for middle class and higher middle class families to hire domestic workers. As a result, there are a lot of individuals, either as employees or as the families of the workers, who are directly or indirectly connected to paid domestic labor in both rural and urban areas.

Given how many individuals are involved in domestic labor, its importance in both the social and economic spheres cannot be discounted. A domestic worker is "a person who is engaged to perform home activities on a temporary, permanent, part-time, or full-time basis," according to the India's Commission of Justice Development and Peace (Srujana 2002). According to research by Banerjee (1996), domestic labor during colonial times was one of the few places where women could find employment because colonial industrial positions were predominantly held by males. However, in today's society, the informal sector now employs one of the largest worker groups in all of its diversity, with domestic services.

Academics often argue that domestic work statistics and government data are woefully insufficient and untrustworthy since the industry is vastly undercounted (Gothoskar 2005; Raghuram 2005). In 2000, Social Alert estimated that there were around 20 million domestic workers in India based on data collected from various different civil society organizations. Additionally, it was noted that domestic labor has been increasingly feminized in the nation, with women making up around 90% of the workforce. This makes the industry one of the very few fields where women are employed in large numbers (Raghuram, 2005).

Because of the intimacy and covert nature of domestic employment, as well as the employers' propensity to downplay their position as employers in favor of taking on more humanitarian focused traits, the labor interactions are mostly exploitative in nature. With the aid of the structural variables that contribute to the workers' institutional vulnerability, I want to untangle the manifestations of these many types of exploitation and the experiences of the workers with it in this study.

Therefore, the current study is inherently interdisciplinary and combines ideas from other academic fields, such as sociology, women's studies, economics, and development studies. The research contextualizes domestic work relations in India as a disputed space of continuing power struggles, drawing largely on feminist theory. The researcher has made an effort to genuinely depict how caste, class, gender, and religious interlocking hierarchies continue to be highly unequal, thoroughly organized, and intricately stratified in the sphere of domestic work.

## 2. Review of Literature

The study of domestic labor has long been significant in the fields of sociology, economics, anthropology, gender studies, and other social sciences. It was also one of the main subjects that interested the early feminist researchers, a subject they disputed and explored in great detail. Feminist studies were particularly interested in the field of domestic work since it was one of the areas where women spent a disproportionate amount of time compared to males. The early feminist research from the 1960s and 1970s defined domestic work as unpaid job done by women, which was in some respects seen as a burden frequently imposed by patriarchy. However, the phenomena of paid domestic employment started to become more prevalent, which changed the way people talked about domestic work.

While it is important to distinguish between paid and unpaid domestic labor, empirical data from studies has shown that the two domains discussed may not necessarily need to be different from one another (Romero 2002). Paid and unpaid domestic employment may overlap at most periods of a woman's life, and they might switch between that of a maid and a madam, or maybe occupy both, albeit not as much in the Indian setting due to the obvious differences supported by the hierarchies between employees and employers (Lan 2003;

Zimmerman, et al 2006). Furthermore, even though female domestic workers in India alternate between paid and unpaid labor on a daily basis, they continue to categorically distinguish between paid employment and the household and family responsibilities that they complete in their familial situations.

Paid domestic employment was projected by modernization theories to be a transient phenomenon that would finally disappear in the 1970s (Moors 2003; Romero 2002). Even Coser, writing in 1973, believed that the relationship between a domestic worker and their employer was pre-modern and based on the traditional master-servant relationship. He asserted that as household appliances become more commonplace in the United States, the demand for domestic workers will decline significantly. However, in stark contrast to these expectations, paid domestic labor has increased significantly over the years around the world, especially for women, making it one of the most employed industries globally (Moors 2003; Anderson 2001). The majority of contemporary research on paid domestic labor is situated in transnational contexts, particularly as it is carried out by migrant workers in Europe (Anderson 2000, Chang 2006, Gregson and Lowe 1994). Also, North America (Chang 2006; Parnas 2002; Repak 2006).

Given the importance of paid domestic employment in a class-segregated nation like India, the level of scholarly research the subject has thus far attracted is not particularly outstanding. Nevertheless, it is also true that more research has been conducted in the United States than in any other nation in the global South. Because of the complex and nuanced information, they offered on the type of labor relations that existed between the domestic worker and the employed in those periods, Banerjee's seminal works from 1996 and 2004 have been largely illuminating in our field of research.

Since the 1990s, a new labor history has emerged in India with the aim of examining the hitherto invisible group of individuals, which includes unorganized and home-based workers (Joshi 2003). Since the history of these structurally disadvantaged groups of people is inextricably related to their social location, which necessitates a critical awareness of both their own houses and the homes of others where they labor, writing about their working class history presents particular difficulties.

As correctly noted by Anne Waldrop (2004), who observed that the rise of fences around upper middle class areas directly have to do with domestic workers as they were one of the main commuter groups to enter these areas, domestic workers are increasingly being perceived as one that is charged by class in recent times. Similar to this, Sara Dickey's (2000) investigation of class within the context of paid domestic service in Madurai focused on the meaning and performance of class. She has explained the antagonistic character of their labor relationships with the aid of interviews, which for her has always boiled down to one that is significantly influenced by class. Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum (2003; 2009), a different group of researchers, have examined the operation of post-colonial domestic servitude between the employing and servant classes in Kolkata. Through her empirical study based in Kanpur, Kathinka Frostyard (2003; 2005) has highlighted the widespread practice of upper caste employers hiring domestic workers as something that essentially contributes to the social reproduction of caste, untouchability, and as well as the hegemony of the upper castes.

The vast majority of the material that is now accessible demonstrates that household labor relations are generally conducted in very similar ways around the world. On the basis of laws, social programmes, and the overall design of gendered divisions of work, national and regional disparities may also exist. The employees' emotions and feelings regarding their interactions with the employer, which speaks volumes about human nature and behavior, are frequently identical, though. To sum up, it can be said that there is a substantial body of literature that, using India as its setting, identifies the subtleties of paid domestic labor performed both full time and part-time.

My research builds on the existing literature and is critically based on caste, class, and gender stratifications. The study finally follows how the life trajectories of female domestic workers are built by focusing on the employment arrangements of part-time or live-out female domestic workers who are salaried. The current study situates the issue in the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala and tries to offer intriguing insights from the new location, diverging from the literature on domestic labor relationships in India, which has so far primarily located themselves in large cities such as Delhi, Bombay, Kolkata, etc.

### 3. Theoretical Approaches

The Marxist feminists have long been interested in the study of paid domestic labor. The study of paid domestic work as a profession that is precisely positioned within the class structure of a particular historical setting may benefit greatly from the analytical insights provided by Marxist feminism. They regard it as a component of society's reproductive system as well (Romero 2002). In this way, domestic labor is frequently portrayed as a location where racial, social, and gender inequality are seen as integral components of the capitalist system of production. Thus, the structural considerations and market-centred imperatives often outweigh and change other common and shared elements of identity among women who work as domestic wage workers (Bakan & Stasilius 1995).

Romero (2000) contends that the struggles encountered by employers are shared by paid domestic employees. These mostly concern the number of hours worked, pay, and workload. Domestic workers may be thought of as consumers since they are looking for the most labor for the lowest feasible pay since domestic employment falls within the informal sector. Additionally, given that domestic labor, unlike the majority of other types of employment, is performed inside household units, it serves both superstructural and economic purposes and is an essential component of the process of social reproduction. This method is used in the current study because it allows us to concentrate on paid household work, each of which has its own unique set of social ties (Gregson and Lowe 1994). While not completely discounting the importance of class in the debate of paid domestic employment, it is equally important to draw attention to the role that caste plays in influencing these labor relations, particularly when attempting to assess the issue within the context of India.

Class and caste have been used as the foci of inquiry in the subject of domestic work thus far. But in addition to the idea of class, there should also be taken into account other social aspects and internal structures that define the field of paid domestic employment. The research that is now available emphasizes gender as an important location of hierarchy and an organizational factor that influences the types of labor relationships and job trajectories in domestic employment (Rollins 1985; Ray 2000). The fundamental goal of the current study's analysis of gender, which is one of the key dimensions, is to disclose the gender's frequently hidden and implicit activities, which have a significant influence on how different societies are organized (Scott 1988). In their study, Ray (2000) broke away from the overt focus on gender as a homogenous category when studying domestic work and found that gender is important, but so are other practises like caste, religion, and class to understand the complex relationships of power and authority that are ultimately produced in the field of paid domestic work.

It is not sufficient to understand how gender functions in the workplace; here is where the present study expands on its methodology by incorporating the idea of intersectionality. The word was first used by Kimberely Crenshaw (1989) and basically refers to the existence of various hierarchical factors, such as caste, class, race, gender, and ethnicity, which interact with one another to create dynamic relationships that in turn affect how individuals live their lives in a society. My goal in this study is to critically examine the manifestations of domestic labor relations and the life courses of the domestic workers while using the notion of intersectionality and bringing the intricacies to the table.

### 4. Research Questions

My aim in this study is to explore the areas of paid domestic work and domestic labor relations in the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala through three interconnected questions:

- 1) To understand the nature of labor relationship of domestic workers with the employers as perceived by the domestic workers
- 2) To understand the working conditions of the domestic workers
- 3) To understand the day-to-day issues and challenges faced by the domestic workers

Through contextualized analysis, the study is also an attempt to reflect upon how the working women within informal and unorganized sectors such as domestic work strives to manage their daily lives. It strives to shed light on the multifaceted and dynamic experiences, which is often less enquired in studies that are conducted upon paid domestic work. More broadly, through this work I wish to systematically engage in discussions on gender, labor, and other intersecting hierarchies in contemporary India.

## 5. Methodology

The Thiruvananthapuram district, which is also the state capital of Kerala, serves as the study's area of investigation. I selected the city in particular as the field of study because a majority of the existing literature on paid domestic work in India is inadvertently contextualized within larger North Indian cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. There is a paucity in the number of studies that have been conducted so far over the topic within the South Indian landscape. It is in order to bridge this gap that I primarily chose the Thiruvananthapuram district.

Qualitative interviews seemed to be the most appropriate approach for my study since I was interested in learning more about how and why employees perceive their domestic labor relations the way they do. This approach best supported my study goals and made it possible to describe labor relations practice and how it affected the women domestic workers' life trajectories in a thorough, contextualized, and nuanced manner. A survey approach would not have been appropriate because the study prioritizes human interactions over any quantitative data. Additionally, more than half of the interviewees lacked enough education, which would have made it even harder to successfully obtain data.

With the use of an interview guide, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 part-time female domestic workers who are employed in the Thiruvananthapuram area of Kerala. Since I couldn't physically travel to the field, all of the interviews were conducted over the telephone or via mobile devices. The interviews, which typically lasted an hour to an hour and a half, were held in Malayalam, the native language of Kerala.

The snowball sampling approach was used to obtain the study's respondents. I was able to interview 15 women who were part-time domestic workers who came from various socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds using the sampling method. They were all employed at the time, performing cleaning, dishwashing, cooking, and other domestic chores in one or more households. Of the 15, 5 were single women, while the remaining 10 were married. The women were all between the ages of 23 and 60.

Fifteen interviews with domestic employees essentially make up the bulk of my data in this regard. I used a qualitative content analysis to analyze the data. It is a technique used to analyze writings, including diary entries, transcripts of interviews, and reports. By categorizing my data into a number of significant and insightful themes, I was able to further condense it. I have made an effort to comprehend what each topic or category means to the participants before making inferences and conclusions from the data. The analysis for this study was conducted continuously and was not limited to a certain time frame.

The study's limitations include the fact that the interviews were done over the phone, making it possible that the non-verbal signs displayed by the participants were missed. Additionally, the live-in employees were purposefully excluded from this study's emphasis on the part-time domestic worker community, which can make it difficult to generalize the study's findings to the whole domestic worker population. Last but not least, the interviews' relatively brief duration also significantly limits their scope.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1) Socio-economic and Demographic Profile of the Respondents

A total of 15 women domestic workers from the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala, who are currently engaged in part-time domestic work in either single or multiple households were qualitatively interviewed for the purpose of the study. The age of the participants was between twenty-three and sixty-three years. Out of the 15 women, five were unmarried and the rest ten of them were married. There was a visible diversity when it came to the religious and caste composition of the respondents, which is also extremely crucial with respect to the objective of the study. Nine of the participants were Hindu, three of them identified themselves as belonging to Islam, and two of the women were adherent to Christianity. Among the Hindu respondents, five were upper caste Hindus and four were Dalits. Both the participants who identified as Christians were Dalits by caste and the three participants who were followers of Islam came under the other backward castes. Out of the fifteen interviewees, a majority of thirteen of them were living in rented settlements. Only two women had houses of their own and both of them belonged to the upper caste Hindu bracket.

On enquiring about the monthly income of the respondents it was understood that the salary of these women fell in between Rs 5000 to Rs 12000 with five thousand being the least income earned by the respondents and twelve thousand being the highest. Out of the fifteen, a notable sum of eight women were below the

poverty line and held ration cards indicating the same. Ten of the interviewed women are the sole breadwinners of their family as some of them had spouses who are unemployed and are alcoholics, while few others who were unmarried had ill parents and dependent younger family members to provide for.

## 6.2) Caste and Class manifestations in the labor relationships between the domestic workers and employers

While interviewing the domestic workers a clear picture of how the hierarchies of both caste and class plays out in multiple ways in the field of domestic work emerged. It was observed that the caste and class positions of these women were strong determinants of how they were recruited, and treated in their workplaces which are the so called “private” domains of the household.

Respondent 1 who is an upper caste Hindu women working in multiple households when asked about the role of caste in finding a house for employment remarked:

*“I work in 3 households at the moment. All my employers are the same caste as I am and in fact it is the fact that I belonged to the caste that primarily encouraged them to employ me. They do not want lower caste women doing their household chores. These things matter significantly around here you know?”*

Respondent 6, who is a 26-year-old OBC Muslim worker says:

*“I have struggled so hard to find the house (only) I am currently working in because most of the employers simply won't recruit me owing to my religious and caste identity. None of the Hindu households (who are in majority around here) want me to do their domestic chores because I am a Muslim and I wear a hijab. This is not just my case, many of us Muslim women who are into domestic work often have a hard time finding employment”*

In fact, the same view was also shared by the other two Muslim domestic workers that I have interviewed apart from her. Their Islamic identity was a huge impediment in finding houses to work in and interestingly all the three of them were currently employed in households which were also Islamic.

Respondent 5 who was a Dalit Hindu domestic worker working in multiple households remarked on the caste-class question along these lines:

*“As a Dalit Hindu woman I have struggled initially to get enough houses to work in, because my caste always came into the equation. The first question the employer often asks is directed towards your caste even till date. But as of today, I do work in a couple of upper caste households and even if they have recruited me there are still ways in which they make me realize the hierarchy of caste. They make me clean the toilets including the commode with just a scrubber and refuse to provide proper brushes. They make me wash even their underwear without any shame as if I ought to do this”*

Another Dalit Hindu domestic worker aged 52, has also cited how her upper caste employer hired her only because they could not find anyone else who aligned with their timings. She also spoke about the ways her employer's re-ascertained caste in her day-to-day work life:

*“I work in 2 upper caste Hindu households currently and perform the duties of sweeping, cleaning, washing clothes, and dishes. But in both the households neither am I allowed to enter the “pooja” room (deity worship space) nor am I supposed to wash any pooja associated utensils. I strongly believe that this practice has to do with the caste I belong to”*

From the instances shared by the workers it can be inferred that caste is an influential factor when it comes to deciding the nature of labor relationship between the domestic worker and the employer. Domestic workers are routinely subjected to explicit and implicit discriminatory, regressive, and feudal practices on the basis of their caste. The scenario is even worse for those domestic workers who hail from oppressed caste backgrounds as we have already seen via the testimonies. All the 15 respondents agreed to the fact that the employers still take huge interest in inquiring about the religious and caste aspects of the employee.

Apart from caste, class manifestations were also abundantly cited by the majority of the respondents. In some cases, such discriminations and differential treatments faced by the workers cannot be assigned categorically to either caste or class, rather it is a fusion of both the factors.

All the 15 women workers who were interviewed cited instances where they were provided water and food in separate steel, or metallic plates and glasses, markedly different from what the employers use for their own consumption. These plates and glasses were placed isolated in the kitchen from the other utensils used by the family.

Respondent 13, an upper caste Hindu worker remarked:

*“I am given food and water in a cheap metallic plate and glass which is to be used only by me. They don't touch my utensils and I am not supposed to even accidentally eat on their plates. Once such an incident took place where I unknowingly drank water in one of their glasses and the employer reprimanded me”*

The practice of offering separate utensils for the domestic workers was experienced by all the workers irrespective of their caste and class orientations. So such a practice is not strictly caste minded per say, rather it is largely to do with the blanket feeling of inferiority and separateness that the employers associate with the domestic workers.

In a similar fashion 5 out of 6 workers interviewed who worked in apartment settlements remarked how these apartments have a separate lift facility for the domestic workers. They are not allowed to use the main lifts, rather access backside lifts which are otherwise mainly used for the transportation of heavy things. Moreover, 4 out of the 6 of these workers also shared instances of repeated checking of their personal stuff on entering and exiting the apartment compound by the securities which many of the workers felt to be utterly disrespectful.

Worker 4 who is a Dalit Hindu women said:

*“The security of the apartment where I work is such a nuisance, he treats me like a thief. He is directed to check my belongings on my entry and exit as if I am here to conduct some theft. It feels bad because we (domestic workers) are the only people who are subjected to such a check and all the other workers like masons, electricians etc do not have to go through this”*

### 6.3) Working conditions of the Domestic Workers

#### a) Contracts or Verbal Agreements?

Verbal agreements were the norm amongst all the 15 domestic workers that I have interviewed. All of them worked independently and were not a part of any SEVA organization or agencies. They did not have any legal contracts or written agreements that recorded their terms of employment. On enquiry, as much as 7 out of the 15 respondents were unaware of the possibility of a written contract in their form of employment. They claimed that they did not even know that such a thing was even possible in domestic work. The rest 8 of the participants knew that there could be scope of a contract but lacked sufficient education and other resources to implement the same. 4 of the respondents who faced substantial issues in their working spaces believed that it was a mistake to enter into the work merely on verbal agreement instead of having something written as proof of their employment with a household.

There were also workers who did not want to get into contractual arrangements with the employers owing to various reasons. For example, respondent 8 who is a Dalit Christian domestic worker said:

*“I personally do not want to get into a contract with my employers because it would impede my flexibility on multiple levels including flexibility of terminating employment, and the ability to undertake multiple jobs. I also work as a street cleaner for two days a week which allows me to get extra money, but with the presence of a contract I might not be able to do that”*

Another 23-year-old respondent remarked:

*“Contracts can affect their scope of finding better opportunities because it legally locks you into working for 2 or 3 years in the same household”*

Therefore, there were diverging opinions among the workers on contracts or verbal agreements being the norm for their employment. While some workers who faced continuous exploitation and mistreatment at the hands of the employers preferred they had contractual bonds, others who wished to have flexibility of

employment were better off with the verbal agreements. Finally, there was also the pragmatics of illiteracy that was inferred, that is, written contracts were seen as of almost no use to the workers if they cannot read and fully comprehend what they are agreeing to. In such instances there are also chances of the workers getting legally trapped into clauses that they did not want to in the first place.

## **b) The Question of Wages and Bargaining Power**

Talking about the wages provided for their service, different workers had both similar and differing opinions. Upon asking about the satisfaction in their wages, a majority of 12 women registered strong dissatisfaction. They believed that the amount of hours they put in, in each household and the extent of physical labor they do is disproportionate with the wages that they are paid.

Respondent 14, a 27-year-old Dalit Hindu worker shared:

*“We have very little say when it comes to our wage. Sure, the employers do ask what and how much we expect but end up giving what they deem suitable which will often be very low. There is hardly any scope to negotiate because there are many others available in the market and the employers will easily go for them. So in order to at least keep the job, most of us comply. In my case, my age and caste have also played a crucial role in how much I earn”.*

Another worker, a 49-year-old Muslim women had this to say:

*“See there is absolutely no shortage of domestic workers in Thiruvananthapuram. There are many of us searching for work both independently and also via agencies. So, if we do not agree to the wage that the employer suggests, however meager it is, then they will easily find somebody else. I am from a BPL household and there is so much poverty already, therefore I cannot afford to bargain with my employer beyond a point because at the end of the day every penny counts even if it is way less than what I should be getting for my work”.*

Deducting from the testimonies of the workers, there is a clear lack of collective bargaining and negotiating power among the domestic workers. Most of them are paid deplorable wages despite working for long hours. One of the primary reasons for the same is a large supply of the workers. This abundant availability of domestic workers in the market has heavily contributed towards their low wages which only benefits the relatively well-off employer at the cost of the vulnerable workers. Majority of 8 workers interviewed for the study are BPL members and struggle to make ends meet because of which they are left with no choice but to take up jobs that pay them less only because it pays them *something*.

## **c) Extra Hours without Remuneration**

Respondent 15, a 63-year-old domestic worker remarks:

*“I work in 3 households currently. Starting from early morning 5.30 to 8.30 at night. All of my employers are very strict about the working hours and hardly allow any flexibility. But what happens often is that some of them make me do extra work on some days leading to extended working hours which also means a delay in work in the next household. So, most of the time I not only end up working extra hours but also never get paid for it and moreover the employers cut my wages for any small delay. It is a loss from all sides”*

This problem is faced by 9 out of 15 of the respondents, where they are made to work overtime and are rarely paid for the extra hours. These extra hours are disguised as a part of their employment when actually it is not. All the workers who were interviewed for the study were paid monthly wages and therefore, the overtime work that they did on a few days of the month was rarely taken into account.

## **d) Use of the Family Idiom to Extract Labor**

Respondent 7, a 60-year-old domestic worker said:

*“My employer calls me “chechi” (elder sister), and tries to make me feel like I am a part of the family. They occasionally give me gifts, food (mainly leftovers), and clothes to re ascertain this feeling. But this familial*



*idiom often backfires on me because it is sentimentally used to extract extra labor without any remuneration or monetary acknowledgement of the same”.*

9 out of the 15 respondents shared this sentiment in different capacities.

While they agreed that calling them *chechi* (elder sister) or *mole* (daughter) and giving them gifts on festivals and other times sometimes did make them feel like a part of the family, they also felt that such an analogy limited their power as a worker to negotiate for better working conditions and wages. It restricted their rights as an employee and conversely enabled the employers to use the façade of family to extract unpaid labor.

#### **e) Absence of Leaves**

Respondent 8, a 35-year-old married domestic worker shared her plight:

*“I am currently 2 months pregnant. This is my second baby and the doctors have advised me to be extra careful about the pregnancy because there are some complications. I should ideally be taking rest but 3 out of the 4 households that I work in did not allow me any leave. Instead they asked me to out rightly leave the job permanently. I cannot afford to do that because the money that comes from my job is the only source of income for my whole family. So for now I continue to work and as for the coming months I am planning to send my elder sister on my behalf so that the spot is not given to anybody else”.*

Another participant, a 55-year-old worker says:

*“Some of these employers have absolutely no compassion or humanity left in them. A few months before I was diagnosed with dengue fever and literally was in no condition to even get out of my bed. At the time I was working in 2 households. While one of them was kind enough to let me take off, for those days (but did cut my salary), the other employer terminated my employment altogether and hired someone else. In our kind of job there is no provision to take a leave even if we fall sick or if any sort of emergency arises. In such cases either our money is cut or we are thrown out of our employment”.*

Respondent 11, a 52-year-old worker remarks:

*“I work in 3 households at the moment and in 2 out of 3 households I have to work for all seven days a week. There is no leave even on a Sunday. It becomes so exhausting and draining most of the time and there is hardly any time to look into the needs of my family, children and even myself. Even if I have to take a day off I have to inform prior and get permission from the employers. Needless to say that they cut the money for those days from my salary”*

As many as 12 out of the 15 respondents worked on all seven days of the week in different households without even a single day off and in circumstances of emergency where they were allowed to take leave, the money was reduced from their monthly wages. The workers called this practice to be extremely cruel, unfair and inhumane.

Respondent 13, a 24-year-old domestic worker says:

*“If we ask for a day’s off then they reluctantly agree to it and moreover cut the rates from our salary, but if they have any commitment and they are not in the city and therefore work cannot be done, even then it is our money that is being deducted because apparently there was no work done. In which world is this fair?”*

5 out of the 15 respondents shared a similar experience where money was deducted from their wages even if they were available for work but the employers had to cancel as they were out of station or had some other functions.

#### **f) Inaccessibility to Functioning Toilets**

3 respondents out of the interviewed when enquired about their working conditions mentioned about the inaccessibility to restrooms at least in one of the households that they worked in. Since these are part-time workers and not live-in workers, the employers are further less concerned about providing clean toilet facilities to them.

One of the respondent commented:

*“In the house that I work in, there are two toilets in total and I clean both of them as well. But I am not allowed to use any of it even at times of emergency. Madam (employer) asks me to control the urge until I go back home. But it is so difficult you see, especially with all the work I do. So I have resorted to not drinking water as much as possible while at work so that I don't have the feeling to urinate”*

Another respondent, a 60-year-old women says:

*“While it is true that I work efficiently irrespective of my age, I cannot mostly control my urge to use the washroom mainly because I am aging. One of the households that I work in has a separate washroom outside for the workers, but it hardly has a proper water supply and this makes it almost impossible to use the washroom. I have requested the employers to fix the issue but they hardly pay any attention to it”*

A young 23-year-old domestic worker had a different experience:

*“The employers of one of the houses I work in have clearly restricted me to not use the washroom while I am menstruating. It is kind of absurd because that is the time when I need to use the washroom the most because I often have to change pads due to heavy bleeding. Many times I have ended up staining my clothes because I could not change my pads on time”.*

From the testimonies of the workers regarding their working conditions, it can be broadly inferred that the majority of them still have a compromised sense of bargaining power when it comes to deciding on wages. A significant percentage of the domestic workers are unsatisfied with their wages and continue to remain underpaid and exploited. They were also found to be manipulated into working extra hours without giving the corresponding remuneration. There were also instances where the workers cited the absence of any substantial social security. They remarked on the inexistence of paid leaves neither in a week nor in a month. There was by and large no provision by the employers for accessing maternity leaves, or leaves in cases of hospitalization or other emergencies. Even when they were granted leaves, it was mostly at the cost of the salaries of the workers. A few of the workers also remarked on the poor toilet facilities or lack thereof in many households and the subsequent toll that it has taken on their respective lives.

#### **6.4) Other Issues and Challenges faced by the Domestic Workers**

Apart from the caste, class interplay and associated discriminatory manifestations in the labor relationships between the domestic workers and the employers, and the exploitative working conditions that the domestic workers are by and large exposed into, there also other issues and challenges that these women face on a day-to-day basis both within and outside the ambit of their work. It is on these challenges and problems that we will be shedding some light ahead.

##### **b) Poverty**

As many as 10 out of the 15 interviewed women domestic workers were the single income generators of their respective households and either had non-working or alcoholic husbands who abused and harassed them or elderly parents and younger siblings who were dependent on them. Most of these live-out or part-time women workers cited the presence of a double-burden which referred to the burden of income generation as well as childcare and housekeeping for their own families. The following are some of the narratives of the workers which contain the circumstantial compulsions that led them to take up this employment and the subsequent issues and challenges that they have to face.

*“I am the only breadwinner of my family. I did not voluntarily choose to get into domestic work but my circumstances left me with no other option. I have an alcoholic husband who is also unemployed and does nothing else but stay in the home all day and drink. We have 2 children and also our respective parents whom we have to provide for and look after and all these expenses are incurred by the meager income that I get through domestic work. Most of the times my salary is barely enough to manage everything” (respondent 2)*

### c) Health Hazards

*“One of the main issues that I face apart from of course the financial stringency is the health related issues that I have started to develop primarily because of the long hours of work. I have severe lower back ache and knee ache which seems to worsen with each passing day. But I can neither consult a doctor because of paucity of money nor can I mention this to my employers because they would immediately start looking for other people. I have to bear the pain and keep going”* (respondent 12)

As many as 8 out of the 15 women complained about at least one health related issue that they developed as a consequence of their long hours of rigorous work. These health issues were mostly overlooked by the workers due to the lack of resources to avail proper health care. They tend to tolerate the pain and keep working for as long as they can.

### d) Allegations of Theft

Another severe and notable problem that as many as 13 out of 15 of the women interviewed faced in the workplace was the repeated allegations of theft in the event of anything going amiss or lost in the household. The women workers shared their different and persistent experiences with such utterly false and baseless allegations.

*“If anything at all goes missing in the house, be it anything ranging from masalas, to utensils, to jewelry, the initial suspect is always us, and the blame is primarily and inevitably placed on us”* (respondent 4)

*“Most of the time these allegations of theft are directed towards us without any proof or any valid evidence. Just because we sweep, clean, cook and wash in the place does not mean that we are behind another’s belongings. There might be people who actually rob from their workplace, I am not denying that but to generalize the behavior as something natural among domestic workers at large and hold us guilty when it is not even our fault is very prejudiced practice. It directly questions our self-respect, dignity, and integrity as human beings”* (respondent 11)

### e) Resistance in Workplace

When asked if the workers registered any kind of resistance in their workplace in case any problem, issues or challenges arise 6 out of the 15 women replied yes while the rest said no. Those women who did respond did so mostly in limited and disguised ways.

For example, of one of the respondent said:

*“..... because utensils are very dirty and they leave food pieces, and waste food in it itself, the plates start to stink. I do not like washing them. I hate it. The employers order me to first clean them with plain water and then apply vim on them. They shout at me literally and this annoys me. So I just wash with plain water and leave it”.*

Whether or not the workers are able to show discontent and resistance also depends on so many overarching factors including the duration of their employment and the individual characteristics of both the employer and the workers. If the worker has a long standing relationship with the employer, then it might be easier to register resistance while for newer employees it could be much more difficult. The social standing and intersectional vulnerability of the worker’s background also plays an integral role when it comes to exercising the agency of actively registering resistance. This is not a privilege that every domestic worker can easily access.

### f) Lack of time for Children

3 out of the 10 married women domestic workers who were interviewed had young children between the age group of 2-12. These women talked about the lack of time to dedicate towards the care of their children due to the congested working hours. Most of them leave behind their children with the grandparents and go to work. They claimed to miss out on small and big events of their child’s lives because they don’t have the liberty to take off from work as when they need to.

Respondent 4, a 33-year-old married women with a 2-year-old child says:

*“Recently my two-year-old daughter fell sick and she needed me to take care of her. But I couldn’t take leave from work so I took her with me to the house where I work so that I could keep my eye on her, but the employer reprimanded me for bringing her. She asked me to never bring my child to their house”*

Similar anecdotes were shared by the other 2 women who had younger children. Infants and children were largely seen to be a nuisance and were not welcomed in the workplaces of the domestic workers even in times of crisis or emergency.

### **g) Marital Status hindering Domestic Work**

A 23-year-old unmarried domestic work talking about her problems said:

*“It has been so difficult for me to find houses to work in mainly because the women employers do not want young and unmarried women to work for their family. We are found to be severe threats. These women are scared that we will woo their husbands or something like that. Even in the family that I currently work for, I am not allowed to talk to the eldest male member. There are also restrictions when it comes to my dressing. I can only wear either a nightie or a suit. Sarees are strictly banned by madam”*

All the 5 unmarried women domestic workers who were interviewed unanimously in their respective interviews talked about the struggles and challenges they face to get work simply because they are young and unmarried. These women shared their experiences with potential employers who did not hire them because of their marital status as being unmarried was found to be a future threat to their household by the women employers. 3 out of the 5 unmarried women workers also faced restrictions on their dressing and were encouraged to wear fully covered clothes. Sarees were seen to be not entertained by the female employers.

### **6.5) Workers Rights and Unionisation**

When the participants were enquired about their rights and the need for unionization of domestic workers there were seemingly diverse opinions that came forward. A very few sections of the respondents believed that the best way of securing good working conditions was to find a good employer, rather than through more systemic means such as legislations, trade unions or through courts. However, the majority of women domestic workers who had faced some form of discrimination or injustice in the workplace had a different take on the issue. They were keen to find alternative routes to secure and safe working conditions.

Respondent 9, a 55-year-old commented on the issue:

*“I want the law to address our rights as domestic workers and protect our rights. The salary paid should be a just amount and the working conditions should be appropriate since we are going to work with a lot of impediments. We need our share of due legal recognition”*

The same worker also pointed out how other forms of employment have their rights guarded by the law, so why not them? She also talked about how they are unable to save anything for the future. She particularly underscored the difficulty of income during old age. The older women who were interviewed were in fact found to have restarted domestic work in their old age for the very same reason- to have a steady income.

Workers in general had little to no faith in the government and did not believe that it would do anything at all to help secure the lives of workers like them. They were skeptical of the government and its potential to bring any sort of regulations. Previously many of them had bitter experiences when they had approached local officials about rights to which they were entitled.

Respondent 14, remarks: *“no one pays any attention to our issues”*

The responses from the participants regarding trade unions were also mixed in nature. Most of the women were ambiguous about what trade unions were and how it functioned. One of the workers thought it was a collective where they could raise issues about their children’s education, while there were others who knew

that it was a place to raise work-related issues. However, a good number of them were wary about trade unions because of political parties being associated with it and they will make promises during election season to amass votes but then not deliver on those promises. Through the interviews it was clear that the domestic workers had a sense of hopelessness in any betterment of their situation. They showed a pessimistic attitude and refused to believe that their status could be professionalized to that of proper employees.

## 7. Conclusion and Discussion

The research specifically looked at the domestic work industry in the Thiruvananthapuram district and examined how paid domestic workers made sense of their working relationships. It made an attempt to look at the domestic employees' overall working conditions as well as the problems and difficulties they encountered on a daily basis. The study finally examined how the trajectories of the female domestic workers are built by focusing on the employment arrangements of part-time or live-out female domestic employees who are paid. The domestic work manifestations have also been systematically analyzed in the study thus far, but in connection to the entire labor force rather than apart from it.

According to the study's findings, caste and class have a significant role in determining the nature of the employment relationship between a domestic worker and an employer. It has been argued how the two discriminatory expressions affect domestic employees' day-to-day life at work. The study also looked at the working circumstances of part-time domestic employees which led to the understanding that the vast majority of the workers suffer from inadequate pay and are also victims of continuous and systematic exploitation at the hands of their employers. Further, it was inferred from the worker's accounts that there were no contractual agreements, coupled with unfair extraction of excessive labor, lack of paid maternity breaks, unfair salary reductions and so on and so forth.

The study went on to focus on identifying additional difficulties faced by female part time domestic workers that contributed to their poverty and other external pressures that lead them to accept domestic employment. The workers reported worries about having to provide for all of the household's money since their husbands were either drinkers or unemployed. Few of them discussed the health problems and worries that they have begun to experience as a result of their extended workdays. Young mothers voiced their worries about not having enough time to care for their kids and about how unwelcoming their employers were when they needed to bring their kids to work. Workers also expressed their extreme contempt for employers for repeatedly accusing them of robbery and theft when misplacement or losses of any sort arise in the home. The study also saw emerging instances of unmarried women struggling to acquire employment because of their marital status since they were viewed as possible danger to marital harmony by the women of the household. These women complained that (if employed) their female employers directed them what to wear and what not to.

The majority of domestic workers did not have much faith in the government's ability to improve their working conditions and displayed a general sense of inferiority toward their own employment, even though they did want their work to receive the proper legal recognition and social security benefits. They were confused about unionization and expressed doubt about political parties interfering with trade union activities for personal gain.

The challenges that these women employees encounter are mostly related to the non-commercial job that they do inside the four walls of the home. The fact that the workspace is "private" in nature makes it challenging to enact and regulate effective policies. As a result, it is essential to create a system of social security at the state and as well as at the national level that can enable the promotion of awareness and provide for the legal protection of female domestic workers' rights. The existing law does not consider their workplace as an establishment. This characterization is used by the center to explain the lack of regulation in the industry. Moreover, there is an absence of an all binding central regulation framework for domestic work in India. Certain states have adopted particular laws and policies pertaining to domestic work but these are also not without their own limitations.

The government should work pro-actively towards collecting scientific data on the number of domestic workers and a detailed analysis of their working conditions. This will enable them to develop better nuanced policies for the support of domestic workers. The social security boards should do more in terms of health insurance, outpatient treatment, maternity benefits, and provident fund for the workers. There should be a

proper grievance and redressal committee for registering complaints and addressing the concerns of the workers.

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