

Domestic Workers: Conditions, Rights and Responsibilities

A Study of Part-Time Domestic Workers in Delhi



A Report on Domestic Workers: Conditions, Rights and Responsibilities
A study of part-time domestic workers in Delhi

Written by
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Experiences and views are those shared by part-time domestic workers with
the research team of Jagori.

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About Jagori

JAGORI ('AWAKEN, WOMEN') is a women's documentation, training and communication centre with the aim of spreading feminist consciousness to a wider audience using creative media. Established in 1984 Jagori is rooted in the experiences of the Indian women's movement with a vision to **help build a just society through feminist values**. It defines its mandate as building feminist consciousness through identifying and addressing the capacity-building, information and networking needs of women, particularly those belonging to oppressed groups in rural and urban areas.

Mission Statement: To deepen feminist consciousness with diverse stakeholders at the national and local levels through advocacy, perspective-building and supporting struggles against human rights violations of women and generating new body of knowledge.

Our Objectives

- **Action research and production** of creative feminist materials
- **Consciousness-raising and leadership development** on women's rights and gender equality
- **Supporting women's struggles against all forms of violence** ensuring access to safety, dignity, justice and rights
- **Creative campaigns and educational materials** on key feminist concerns to respond to the programming and resource needs of women's groups, community and field organisations, media and development organizations
- **Advocacy and Networking** to enlarge and claim democratic spaces and strengthen women's movement building efforts

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1. Introduction : Issues

Over the last few years, studies on domestic work in India have noted the increase in the numbers of migrant female domestic workers in the cities. They have also observed that domestic work is highly informal in its organisation and highlighted the vulnerabilities of domestic workers¹ who belong to the poorer and uneducated sections of society. These studies also note that women from marginalised castes form a substantive group of domestic workers (Kaur 2006; Neetha 2004 and 2008).

Domestic workers, in particular women domestic workers, are a constantly growing section of workers in the informal sector of urban India. The last three decades have seen a sharp increase in their numbers, especially in contrast to male domestic workers (Neetha 2004). Research has shown that till 2000, the urban workforce participation of women in India has been lower than those of rural women. Marginal increases were observed in 2000-04 (Rustagi 2009). In 2004, the figure of national urban female workforce participation reached an all-time high of 16 percent.² In 2004-05, there were 3.05 million women domestic workers in urban India marking an increase by 222 percent from 1999-2000 (Chandrashekhar and Ghosh 2007).

In 2004-05, there were 3.05 million women domestic workers in urban India marking an increase by 222% from 1999-2000.

This increase in the number of domestic workers is linked to a shift from agrarian-based economy to a manufacture and service-based economy. It is also associated with the growth of the urban middle class, especially the increase in the number of women working outside their homes and the availability

of cheap domestic labour. The migration from the tribal belt is ascribed to “ecological degradation, landlessness and land alienation, unemployment and poverty” (Kujur and Jha 2008: 25). Migration of girls is also attributed to the transition in the tribal societies as educated tribal girls do not want to work in the agriculture sector (ibid).

Domestic work has a long history in India with both men and women working in others’ homes as ‘servants’.

India has witnessed large-scale migration over the last two decades of girls from tribal areas of Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. These girls come with other girls from the village, through private recruiting agents, or other organisations to be employed as ‘maids’ in urban households. With increasing migration of tribal girls to Delhi, the trend of independent migration of girls has also seen a sharp rise. All migration may not be safe as girls are vulnerable to be trafficked for domestic work by agents and abused physically, psychologically and sexually by employers and agents. They may also be exploited through long hours of work and in conditions similar to bonded labour--isolated and solely dependent on employers.

This increase in the number of domestic workers is often viewed as ‘feminisation of labour’, a term that has been used in two ways in the last two decades (Kanji and Menon-Sen 2001). First, it is used to refer to the rapid and substantial increase in the numbers of women in paid work. In developing countries, this is accompanied by a shift from agriculture to manufacturing and services. Secondly, it is used to describe the flexibility of labour for both women and men. This arises from the changing nature of employment where irregular conditions once associated with women’s ‘secondary’ employment have become widespread for both sexes. The flexibility of jobs comprise informal activities, sub-contracting, part-time and home-based work with little organising of labour through unions. However, in the case of domestic workers, feminisation of labour is used both in terms of an increase in the number of women domestic workers and also the lack of any standards for working conditions and negligible organising in unions. Household work has been taken over largely by women. The poor women who engage in domestic work are often unable to care for their own families, leaving their own children alone for the whole day, sometimes tying children to their cots (John 2010).

Domestic work has a long history in India with both men and women working in others’ homes as ‘servants’. The affluent had servants, mostly men, with loyalty, obligation and patronage being the salient aspects of this relationship. Caste

defined the hierarchy-- lower castes performed the 'dirty' work of cleaning while higher caste men cooked. Though domestic work is not a new phenomenon in India, it cannot simply be viewed as an extension of historical feudal culture where the affluent employed 'servants'. Both in the urban and rural contexts, the nature of work and workers has been rapidly changing. The sector now primarily comprises women domestic workers who are not recognised as 'workers' while their work is 'undervalued'. This is primarily due to the gendered notion of housework--value is not ascribed to women's work in their homes, and by extension, even paid work in others' homes is not given any value or regarded as work. It is also undervalued because it is often performed by poor, migrant women from lower castes. All these contribute to the inferior status of their work, both in their own minds and in society.

Domestic work has to be placed in the larger context of patriarchy and subjugation of women. Patriarchy hands over controls of women's mobility, economic resources, productive and reproductive power to men. Both biological and social reproduction is carried out by women in most societies. Social reproduction refers to all the caring and nurturing activities necessary to ensure human survival and maintenance such as cooking, feeding, washing, cleaning, nursing and other household activities. Although these are necessary for human survival, they are neither considered work nor economic in nature and hence are invisible, unrecognised and unpaid. Usually it is women and girls who perform socially reproductive work all across the world. The endless and repetitive labour provided by them is not acknowledged as valuable work.

Domestic work includes mental, manual and emotional aspects, including care work that is necessary to maintain people and communities (Anderson 2000). Domestic work is thus viewed as reproductive work that creates not only labour units but also people and social relations. Anderson further draws attention to domestic work being rooted in the community: by 'the doing of domestic work we literally reproduce our communities and our place within them' (ibid: 14). In this context, it is important to note who does the domestic work as this reflects the relation between genders, race and class. Apart from the 'wife' or the 'mother', it is often paid domestic workers who reproduce social relationships and social beings. Yet, the status of the domestic worker is lower than the woman employer who can be considered as her manager. The worker is a labourer or 'the hands'. Since social reproduction is not recognised as work, domestic workers too receive no recognition as workers and are hence paid low wages.

The employer-employee relationship is a complex one and is viewed as one of domination, dependency and inequality. Also, this is an area of work where the employer and the employee are mostly females. As a home is the site of

work, relations between employer and employee are often not limited to work but spill over as larger support systems. This “confuses and complicates the conceptual clarity between family and work, custom and contract, affection and duty...because the hierarchical arrangements and emotional registers of home must coexist with those of workplace and contract in a capitalist world” (Ray and Qayum, 2009:3³).

The employer–employee relationship is a complex one and is viewed as one of domination, dependency and inequality.

Research in India has hence focussed on migration of rural girls and women to cities, their intentions of moving to the city (work and economic reasons), nature and categories of domestic work, and, more recently, on their rights and organising them as workers.

Before moving to the specific research undertaken by us, the following section outlines the different aspects of domestic work. The focus here is on part-time, live-out workers who work in different households undertaking various tasks.

1.1 Different categories of domestic work

In the Indian context, domestic work is generally defined in terms of types of work performed and the time spent at work, i.e., in the employer’s home. Live-out and live-in are two distinct categories of domestic work. Live-out work is primarily of two types: first, those who work in one house for the whole day and go back to their homes in the evening and; secondly, those who work in different houses, moving from one to the other, performing one or more tasks in each household. They may clean in one house, chop vegetables in another and wash clothes in the third, while some others may only perform a task, such as cooking. They often visit these households twice a day though the requirements in some families may be limited to only once a day. Another form of part-time live-out work is in terms of piece-rate. It is often applied to washing clothes and wages are calculated on the basis of buckets of clothes.

Some women and girls migrate to the city to work as domestic workers, especially those who work as live-in workers. Others take up jobs as part-time domestic workers in the city when they are unable to sustain their household expenses within the wages of their husbands.

Women who work as live-out part-timers are primarily migrants who move to the city with their families or are female construction workers who enter domestic labour when no construction work is available. Some of them are also landless labourers who are displaced when rural areas are absorbed by cities. On moving to the city, they mainly reside in the difficult conditions of slum clusters. They begin work at one or two houses and gradually take up more, depending on their individual capacities, the money needed and their specific stage of life cycle (for example, women with very young children prefer to work in fewer households than older women). Besides learning work, they have to adapt to urban ways of living and a culture different from their own.

Palriwala and Neetha (2009) point out that this kind of work is characterised as 'part-time' from the perspective of the employer. For the domestic worker, the actual number of hours she spends in all the households she works in is a full day's work. They also note that this form of work may be flexible but is also unstable as workers shift out of the sector, change employers, stop working for a few years due to marriage or childbirth and also have constant issues with their employers. Yet, in terms of time spent at work, it may be as much or more than a live-in worker. "The fragmented nature of their work, the multitude of tasks, a multiplicity of employers, and the instability of employment pose challenge in documenting them and in attempts to organise them" (ibid: 14).

The full-timers live with the employer's family. Studies have reported that they often have no specified work hours with some working for eighteen hours a day. Some do not get any rest during the day while others may not be given proper food or living space. Non-payment of wages, no weekly leaves or holidays, verbal and sexual abuse is also reported. They have no recourse to any form of assistance when they face harassment – verbal, physical or sexual. A large number of full time workers are hired through recruiting agents who also collect their wages, often withholding a substantial part. Private work agents often recruit girls in villages and bring them to cities. Some agents provide basic training for a couple of days and then send them to homes as domestic workers. Agents also send them untrained. There is no state mechanism to check these agents or their functioning. These agencies are difficult to trace as they frequently change their identities, location and phone numbers. They also charge a large amount from employers for providing domestic helpers. Sexual exploitation by recruiting agents has also been reported. It is important to point out that most agencies are commercial in nature and do not focus on the welfare of workers. The condition of domestic workers has not improved with the growth of placement agencies (Neetha, 2004 and 2009).

Full-time workers also live in the quarters provided by employers including government and defense officials. They are provided with living space but

are expected to be on call for most of the day, resulting in no fixed working hours. Thus, both forms of domestic work are undervalued and not regulated – workers are underpaid, overworked and unprotected.

About 185, 595 children are employed as domestic workers and in dhabas. (Source: 2001 Census)

A different trend in the changing demographics of the domestic worker is migration of girls from the northeast. They primarily work as salespersons but are increasingly joining as domestic work, working mostly with affluent Indians and expatriates. Their ethnic and cultural distinctiveness makes them vulnerable. They are also subject to ‘racial’ stereotyping and isolation because of language difficulties. Similarly, young girls from Bengal who come to Rajasthan to work are also vulnerable and isolated because of language.

Another critical issue is that of the age of the domestic worker. Despite laws to prevent it, child domestic labour is still prevalent in India. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulations) Act 1986 lists domestic work in the schedule of “hazards” whereby the permissible age for work is 18 years. Yet, given the socio-economic conditions in the country, 15 years may appear permissible but most organisations working on the issue and child rights advocate the age of admission to domestic work as 18 years. They argue that these children work long hours, are not given nutritious food, are often sexually abused and have no way of raising their voices.

Based on the 2001 census, about 185, 595 children are employed as domestic workers and in *dhabas* (roadside tea and food stall) (UNICEF 2007). Employers prefer children as they are cheap. They are often paid as little as rupees 300 per month for work that lasts ten hour each day and seven days a week. They are also beaten up and in some cases, sexually abused. Dimensions of trafficking can be seen here as well--children are often brought in from poor areas of the country and made to work as bonded labourers. Many are not allowed contact with their families. They live in their employers’ homes without any support system. Different organisations are involved in rescuing such children but the issue of rehabilitation has been a major difficulty and concern. The government has not provided adequate rehabilitation centres and alternatives for families relying on the labour of their children (Srinivasan 2010).

1.2 Working conditions

The tasks performed by either category of domestic workers may include cleaning (sweeping, swabbing and dusting), washing (clothes and dishes), or

even putting machine-washed clothes on the clothesline or/and folding them, cooking, or preparation for cooking such as chopping vegetables and making dough, or cooking a part of meal, ironing, housekeeping and extensions of these outside the home such as shopping. Domestic work may also include childcare or care of the aged.

There are no standard norms that decide working conditions. By and large, employers decide wages though this is often the 'rate' of the area they live in. Wages also depend on the bargaining power of the domestic worker and workers' desperation for work. Experienced workers may be able to bargain for more while those desperate for work may be willing to work at lower rates. Other factors that influence decisions about wages include the type of tasks performed and the neighbourhood. Rates vary according to the task (for example, cooking attracts more wages than cleaning) and the socio-economic profile of employers. These factors are not cast-in-stone as workers are made to perform extra work with no additional compensation, especially during festivals or when employers have guests. There is no guarantee of employment as employers can ask workers to leave with no prior notice or financial compensation. (Jagori 2004, Mehrotra 2008, Neetha 2008, Menon 2010).

These studies also note that only a few workers get a weekly off; paid leave is often the result of difficult negotiations with the employers. Getting sick leave also depends on the good will of the employer. Instances of workers losing their jobs due to long leave taken at time of childbirth or ill health are often reported. Some also lose their jobs when they visit their villages. Deduction in wages for extra leave is a common practise among employers. Part-time workers are not allowed access to a toilet in the employers' homes. Many commute long distances and thus have no time to cook and carry food with them. They are often not provided with any tea or snacks and stay hungry till they get back home where they have to cope with difficult living conditions in urban slums.

1.3 Living conditions

Many domestic workers living in large cities also face constant threats of demolitions of their slums and relocation to newer areas on the fringes of the city. This often leaves them both homeless and jobless.

Most urban poor live in different types of slum settlements and work in the informal sector. The relocation of the poor to resettlement colonies takes them far away from areas of economic activity in the city, thus making it impossible

for them to even earn sustainable livelihood. In this context, it has been well documented that the process of relocation and displacement has led to problems of sustained access to livelihood, education, basic services and healthcare where women suffer the most. Building a house in the resettlement area takes up a large part of the family's income. Even if these workers start work after relocation, living on the margins of the city implies that work will mostly be in areas that are far. Commuting becomes a major issue both in terms of cost and time (Menon-Sen and Bhan 2008).

In the resettlement areas (and in the slums), women spend a large part of their time accessing essential services such as water and toilets. The double burden that they face is compounded due to harsh living conditions. This has been documented for other areas of Delhi as well (Jagori 2004). Besides this, they have no access to any form of childcare services. They often leave their own children alone while they go to take care of others' children. In their study on paid care workers, Palriwala and Neetha (2009) note that domestic workers highlight their lack of access to institutional care facilities that provide quality care at affordable rates in their neighbourhoods.

1.4 Issues of social security and welfare

Some of these women work as domestic workers over long time periods but have little or no savings for their old age. They are not entitled to any old-age pensions, gratuity or bonus. They have no medical insurance and all expenses of illness, hospitalisation of self and family are borne by the worker. Neither do they have any coverage for childbirth, injury at work place or loans to build houses or other social responsibilities. Such loans or grants, as all other benefits, depend on their relation with the employer and the employer's goodwill. No data is available on older domestic workers. Though domestic workers have been included in the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008 (Act 33 of 2008), they have not yet got any benefits. Even in Maharashtra, the Domestic Workers Welfare Board Act 2008 has not been implemented.

1.5 Organising domestic workers and demanding recognition as workers

Domestic workers seldom have an organised mechanism for collective bargaining. Last three decades have seen the emergence of organisations and social activists working with domestic workers to organise them (into groups and unions) by empowering them and advocating for their rights. For example, the National Domestic Workers Movement has branches in 23 states in India. They focus on the dignity of domestic work, empowerment of workers through justice, abolition of child domestic labour, crisis intervention and prevention of trafficking.

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Organisations such as *Vidarbha Molarkin Sangathana* were established in 1980 in Nagpur and today works in ten cities in Maharashtra. *Pune District Molarkin Sangathan* works with part-timers in the city on issues of weekly off, fair wages and increments. Relatively new organisations such as LEARN and *Mahila Kaamgar Sangathana* are also state specific and have branches in Mumbai, Nasik, Solapur and Nagpur. Both these organisations work with domestic workers to organise into self-help groups and formalise their struggle for wages, dignified livelihood and recognition as workers. *Domestic Workers Rights' Union* in Karnataka undertook a study to conceptualise fair wages. Besides advocacy on the rights of domestic workers, they have a database of workers in select areas, and handle cases of different forms of violence against domestic workers. Other organisations such as *Tamil Nadu Domestic Workers Union* worked for the inclusion of domestic workers in Tamil Nadu Manual Workers Act. *Manushi Domestic Workers Union* and *Arunodhaya Domestic Workers Union* in Chennai focus on, among other issues, registration of domestic workers with sectoral board and management of wage-related disputes. Organisations such as *Rajasthan Mahila Kamgaar Union* organise domestic workers in Jaipur with a focus on their empowerment, wage disputes, rescue of child domestic workers and violence faced by domestic workers at their workplace and home. Such organisations are working towards empowering domestic workers and ensuring that they are not without agency and can challenge the domination of employers. Besides the rights of workers, few organisations such as *Astitva*, Dehradun, provide childcare facilities for children of domestic workers.

Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgar Union organises women domestic workers in Jaipur with a focus on their empowerment, wage disputes and violence faced by workers at their workplace and home.

The efforts of these organisations and activists has led to the inclusion of domestic workers in 'Tamil Nadu Manual Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Work) Act, 1982' and the 'Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008 (Act 33 of 2008)' as well as the passing of the 'Maharashtra Domestic Workers Welfare Board Act 2008'. Notifications on minimum wages for domestic workers have been issued by states such as Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Meghalaya, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan. There is a considerable debate among activists and experts on calculation of wages –

whether wages should be based on 'need-based formula'⁴ or should it be a living wage, including in-kind payment or be based on time or piece-rate? Further, over the years, attempts to have a national legislation for domestic workers have been made. Currently, different organisations and campaigns are working towards different draft bills. These are under the aegis of the National Commission of Women, National Campaign Committee for Unorganised Sector Workers, SEWA and recently by the Domestic Workers Rights Campaign (DWRC). Various draft bills deliberate on the registration of workers, employers and agencies, regulation of work and wages, social security and enforcement mechanisms.

Exploitation of women domestic workers in foreign countries has been documented by organisations such as Arunodaya Migrants Initiative, Chennai. Those who migrate are often subjected to tortuous conditions by their employers who keep their passports, leaving no option for these domestic workers. The problem is further compounded in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries as none of them cover domestic work under their labour laws. The Government of India has imposed an age limit of 30 years for women domestic workers to migrate overseas. The Government of India created a new Ministry for Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in 2005 to take responsibility for Indian migrants overseas, especially the labour migration issues. Organisations working with migrant workers demand that there should be a comprehensive legal recognition and protection of migrant workers that includes employment contracts, bilateral agreements, national laws and regulations in both the sending and receiving countries besides international human rights conventions and treaties. With respect to domestic workers, 'home' should be recognised as work place and laws should address issues of confinement, withholding of documents, denial of access to communication, no breaks during working hours and denial of the right to free movement. MOIA has undertaken an awareness campaign about the rules and regulations for domestic workers in foreign countries on major television channels.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) organised a session on domestic work in June 2010 at Geneva, Switzerland, to discuss rights and legislations for domestic workers. One of the principal functions of the ILO is setting international labour standards through the adoption of conventions and recommendations. Ratification of a convention by a country is voluntary. Adoption of a convention by the International Labour Conference allows governments to ratify it. When a specified number of governments ratify a convention, it becomes a treaty in international law. All adopted ILO conventions are considered international labour standards regardless of how many governments have ratified them. The coming into force of a convention results in a legal obligation on the part of countries that have ratified it to apply its provisions. Though issues vary from

country to country, member nations have discussed the need to standardize norms. However, no conclusions were arrived at and the issue will be discussed again in 2011. It is significant to point out that any decision adopted by the ILO will imply recognition of domestic work as a form of work and governments will have to take note of these standards.

Our work with domestic workers has to be located against this backdrop. In the following section, we briefly trace our work with women workers in the informal sector, especially with domestic workers in urban areas, and spell out our concerns in this research.

1.6. The research: our concerns

JAGORI has been working on issues of migrant women and women workers in the informal economy over the past several years. In 2002, we carried out a study to explore migration and work patterns of women in Rajasthan and Gujarat. A detailed research undertaken in 2003 focussed on the lives of first generation women migrants to Delhi. *Rights and Vulnerabilities* (2004) explored women's migration from different rural areas to Delhi and their subsequent life in Delhi. A special focus of the report was the different forms of work in the informal economy, such as domestic workers, construction workers, factory workers, junk dealers, self-employed women, piece-workers and home-based workers. In the study, it was found that vulnerabilities of domestic workers were located in their lack of negotiating power in all aspects of their work including wage negotiation, number of holidays, getting a cup of tea and snack or getting gifts and bonus. With insights from this study, we decided to further explore the living and working conditions of female domestic workers in the city of Delhi.

Mewa Bharti, a JAGORI fellow⁵, undertook a study in Jaipur which demonstrates the informal nature of domestic work and the vulnerabilities of the domestic workers. The study draws attention to lack of norms for wages, leave (weekly and annual) and working conditions. In fact, even the term domestic worker is rarely used – they are referred to as 'maids' or 'servants' thereby not giving them any status as workers. There are several cases where workers are treated very well but it is entirely at the discretion of the employers. In its current form, it is not a contract between two parties but an informal relationship with the ability to negotiate being dependent upon the good will of the employer (Mehrotra 2008).

Secondly, it shows how a home as the work place adds to the vulnerability of the worker and makes 'work' informal. Since a home is not a formal workplace, it becomes difficult to demand rights or entitlements as formal workers.

Further, the under-valued nature of domestic work in the larger society places these women very low in social structures. All these contribute to the low status of their work and its location in the informal sector. As with many other forms of informal work, the number of workers available is on the rise with the constant rural to urban migration, including from far-off states such as West Bengal. Such workers have no mechanism of support in case of loss of job, ill health, maternity benefits or old age pension.

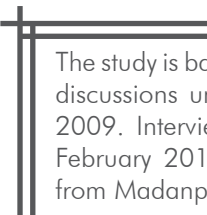
There are other issues that need to be raised. For instance, studies focus on the process of migration, settling down in the city, the social network and the reasons for selecting domestic work (Neetha 2004, Kaur 2006). Is it only because they see it as an extension of their work at their own homes? Do they need to convince their families to be able to work? What is the role of family history of domestic work? Recent studies have focused on wages and differences on the basis of task and locality (ISST 2009)⁶. Yet, some significant issues have not been addressed. What about extra work? Are they paid for it? Are part-time workers paid in kind? What are the benefits given to them by employers? Are they provided with any assistance at the time of childbirth or illness? What are the gifts given at festivals? Given that these workers reside in slums and resettlement colonies, how do they cope with displacement and relocation? What are the forms of abuse faced by the part-timers – verbal, psychological and sexual? We need to explore the ways in which they challenge the authority of the employer.

To understand the conditions of workers, it is important to discuss the perspective of the employers as well. How do employers view domestic work? How do they select a worker? What changes has this form of work undergone in the last few decades? Do they think that they have any responsibility towards the domestic worker or is it a one-sided relationship? This is especially important as the workspace is the employer's home and the boundaries between contract/custom and affection/duty are blurred, dynamic and certainly hierarchical.

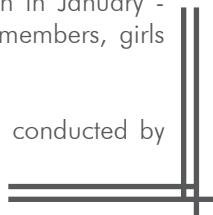
In brief, our study supports existing research on migration of domestic workers, processes of settling down, assistance of social networks in settling down/finding jobs and the lack of standards in their working conditions. To build on the existing research, we explore other dimensions of their working conditions such as unpaid work done by the domestic workers and facilities and benefits provided to them. The entire discussion in this report is placed in the context of urban poverty and how it affects their lives as women and workers. Further, we focus on aspects of dignity and respect from the perspective of the domestic worker and that of the employer to examine how it shapes perceptions about domestic work. We also attempt to look into the different forms of abuse faced by them at work. The report also touches upon discussions at the level of the state

and the ILO to address the issue of domestic work. In other words, we address issues of working conditions, rights of workers and responsibility. In doing so, we explore dimensions of responsibility – of the worker, the employer and the state. We hope that this report would benefit women’s groups⁷, NGOs and other organisations working with domestic workers in organising them towards collective bargaining for improved and standardised working conditions and social security. This would facilitate the process of repositioning domestic work from an occupation to a profession.

The preparatory stages of the research involved discussing various aspects of working conditions with part-time domestic workers residing in Madanpur Khadar. Based on these discussions and the most critical problems identified by them, we formulated questions for the survey. The survey was administered to part-time domestic workers residing in Madanpur Khadar. Local women and girls were selected and trained to administer the questionnaire. The team met domestic workers in the evenings, or late evenings, according to their availability. Some refused to participate in the study citing shortage of time or lack of consent from their husbands. Besides this, in-depth interviews with fifty domestic workers were undertaken to gain insights into the reasons for entering domestic work, family history of domestic work, problems faced at child-birth and similar issues in the context of their work. Focus group discussions were held later on issues of abuse and sexual harassment. The voices of the workers are critical to the study and have been cited to draw attention to the range of experiences and issues.



The study is based on a survey, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions undertaken between November 2008 and October 2009. Interviews with employers were undertaken in January - February 2010. In addition to the Jagori team members, girls from Madanpur Khadar undertook the survey.



The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted by Jagori team members.



2. The field and research

2.1 Field site: Madanpur Khadar J. J.⁸ Colony

Madanpur Khadar is a resettlement area located at the border of Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, near Kalindi Kunj, in South East Delhi. This JJ colony is adjacent to Madanpur Khadar village and the Yamuna canal flows near it. The approach road from NOIDA (part of the National Capital Region of Delhi) has a canal on one side of the road and an Indian Oil Depot on the other side. This stretch sees heavy truck and container movement besides public transport. Madanpur Khadar J.J. colony can also be approached from Madanpur Khadar village also. A direct road linking Kalindi Kunj to Phase III, B2 Block and Pocket A and D Block has been laid; it is used by private vans and auto rickshaws.

We started our work in the Phase III area in 2003. People were first relocated there in 2000 and the relocation continued till 2004. Over these years, communities from Nehru Place, Govindpuri, Kailash Colony, Raj Nagar, Alaknanda and East of Kailash have been relocated here. The area has small *pucca* (permanent structure) houses as well as few *kuchha* (impermanent structure) houses. Most households have placed some of their belongings - cots, buckets, and cooking stoves - outside on the narrow brick paved streets. There are paid public toilets in all blocks. These toilets close at 10 pm. after which all residents, including women, use the open fields. A large number of shops are located on the main approach road into Phase III and on all inner streets. There are no designated bus stops with sheds or other indicators but buses stop at three places in the resettlement area with the last stop near phase III. Rural Transport Vehicles (RTVs) that ply in the area have no designated stops though they halt at a few places that have been informally identified as stops on the roadside. Public parks have not been developed but the area has been demarcated. An area popularly called the *pahadi* (highland or hilly areas), is used by women to collect wood for fuel and also for open defecation. There is no boundary wall

around the resettlement area and can be accessed from any side. There are some agricultural fields adjacent to the phase III. Other phases are located within walking distance, the furthest being about a kilometer away.

When we first visited Madanpur Khadar, large sections of phase III were vacant. Few houses of those resettled earlier had been built and were inhabited. The recently relocated families had kept their belongings under plastic or tin sheets. At this time, the narratives were all about the unfairness of demolition and relocation, and the worries about livelihood in this distant area with poor facilities and opportunities. They also had to build their homes and settle in before the impending winter. Our visits to the area continued primarily to support their demands as citizens for better infrastructure and political rights. Women's collectives were formed to create community-based mechanisms to address violence against women and girls. As of now, we continue to work with women's collectives and youth in the area.

2.2 Social and demographic profile of the surveyed domestic workers

We interviewed 691 domestic workers living in different parts of Madanpur Khadar JJ Colony. These workers worked in a total of 1958 households.

Nearly 83 percent of those surveyed lived in their own homes while 15 percent lived in rented houses and the remaining 2 percent lived in houses of relatives for which they paid no rent. Those who were relocated moved from Nehru Place, VP Singh Camp, Raj Nagar, East of Kailash, Nizamuddin, R.K.Puram, Alaknanda and Kalkaji. Not all residents have been displaced from other areas as some residents moved after the colony was set up. Some of these residents bought houses or plots from the original owners.

Table1: Age profile of domestic workers

Age (in years)	Percentage
15-20	4
20-30	19
30-40	42
40-50	24
50-60	8
60 and above	4

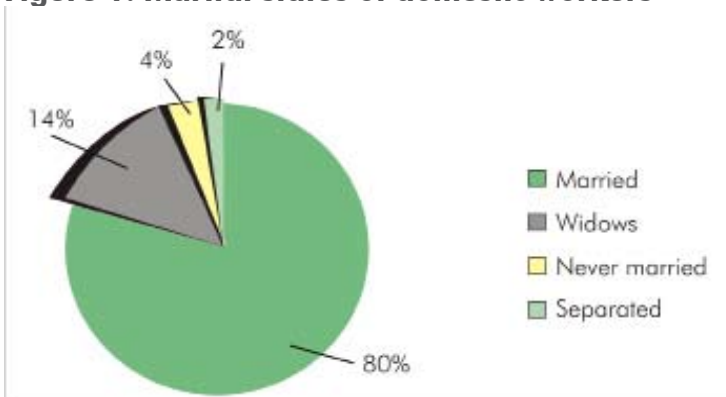
As can be seen in the above table, the largest number falls in the reproductive age group and they had to cope with childcare along with their work. The older women had to continue work for lack of other options. Apart from the physical labour of work, they found the commuting to be tiring.

Table 2: Caste profile of domestic workers

Caste	Percentage
Scheduled castes	61
OBC	5
Scheduled tribes	1
General	31
Others	2

Majority (91 percent) of the respondents in our sample were Hindus. The others were predominantly Muslims and Christians. The remaining belonged to other religions such as Buddhism. Traditionally, upper caste Hindu households did not allow lower caste Hindus and Muslims to enter their kitchens. As Palriwala and Neetha (2009) note, in recent times employers have not followed this rigidly as the supply of higher caste domestic workers has not kept up with their demand. Various studies, including micro-level studies such as ours, indicate that schedule castes workers (mostly migrants to the city) work as domestic workers. Studies have noted that some do not enter domestic work in their place of origin due to their higher caste status but do so elsewhere. Similarly, low castes would not find employment in their place of origin but less strict caste norms in bigger cities would provide them with employment opportunities (Kasturi 1990, Raghuram 2001, Neetha 2003).

Figure 1: Marital status of domestic workers



With respect to the marital status of domestic workers in our sample, 80 percent were married at the time of the survey, 14 percent were widows, 4 percent had never married and 2 percent were separated. A reading of literature shows that the last three decades have witnessed a change in the age profile of domestic workers. In the 1970s, most women domestic workers were household heads – widows, deserted and older women. The situation began to change in the 1980s with increase in migration of families and also of single women (Banerjee 1982, 1992). In their analysis of NSSO data between 1999 and 2005, Palriwala and Neetha (2009) note that the number of widows and separated women in domestic work has increased. In our study, 18 percent women were in this category. Most of the older women in our sample worked either because they were single or their husbands could not work due to ill health.

Table 3: State of origin of domestic workers

State of origin	Percentage
Uttar Pradesh	48
West Bengal	16
Bihar	11
Madhya Pradesh	7
Rajasthan	4
Others (including Assam, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh)	14

Studies have noted that rural-urban migration is the fastest growing form of migration in India with Delhi (the others being Gujarat and Maharashtra) as an important destinations for inter-state migration (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009). In our study, it is significant to highlight that 86 percent of domestic workers were first generation migrants with only 14 percent of the sample was born in Delhi. As noted above, they were from Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. A smaller number migrated states such as Assam, Orissa and Tamil Nadu. Majority of workers thus had to find a place to stay in the city and employment, in some cases without the active support of family or social network, and then face displacement within the city as well. As stated earlier, working conditions of domestic workers have to be viewed against the backdrop of migration and displacement.

Of our sample, only 27 percent domestic workers had ever attended school. Of these, 43 percent had attended school between 3-5 years and 26 per cent

had attended it for 5–8 years. In most cases, their own children were enrolled in school, though for a varying numbers of years. Of those currently in school, 73 percent were studying between classes 1 and 5. The husbands of nearly 44 percent domestic workers were illiterate. All husbands of domestic workers in our sample also work in the informal sector.

Table 4: Profession of the husbands of domestic workers

Profession	Percentage
Daily wage labourer	30
Auto driver	12
Office peon	11
Office cleaners	7
Self-employed	7
Drivers	6
Domestic workers	4
Others (mechanics, carpenters, guards, factory workers, cycle rickshaw pullers, gardeners etc)	22
Do not work due to illness or disability	1

As indicated in the table above, a considerable number had casual work (daily wage work) while the others had more regular work. In such cases, especially the former, the regular work of the domestic worker becomes the stable source of income for these families.

3. 'Herstory' of work

3.1 The beginning

85 percent of women in the sample had done no form of paid work before starting domestic work. Of the 15 percent who had worked before, a majority had worked in factory/export houses, as daily wage labourers in construction work, or as agriculture workers (while still in the village). Others have observed this trend also (D'Souza 2010).

For 85% of domestic workers in the sample, domestic work was the first form of paid work done by them.

As other studies have shown, they start working due to financial difficulties in the city. Though women start work at different time intervals after their move to the city, they point out that they started working to supplement their husbands' wages. In some cases, they work only after they are unable to meet the expenses of growing children, especially their education. Another reason for joining domestic work is due to the death of the husband or desertion.

Why do these women choose domestic work? Studies have shown that domestic work is among the most easily available employment for migrants (Neetha 2004, Kaur's 2006). They point out that women enter domestic work as it requires no specific skills, is easily accessible and their local network assists them in finding this work. Workers in our study cited these reasons as well. For instance, a worker who was in her 40s stated that in this form of work a woman neither requires any skills nor does she need a language in common with the employer as this work can be done without any interaction. Another worker in her late 30s pointed out that she finds it safe to work in someone's house where



she has to interact only with women. Women also pointed out that they were uncomfortable to work in factories with men. Childcare was cited as another reason for selecting domestic work as they have the option of choosing the quantum of work that allows them to have time for their children. A few workers had moved from construction work to domestic work as the former was not easily available and aging workers found the former difficult. In this context, it is significant to highlight that some families/women who know about domestic work through their network in the city, had decided to work as a domestic worker before migrating to the city.

Before starting to work as a domestic worker, a family member of 27% of the sample had worked as domestic workers. Of these, 82% of them had worked along with them before working independently.

Our study highlights that a family history of domestic work also influences the decision by opening up the option for them. Of the 27 percent with a family history of domestic work, the majority (72 percent) belonged to their natal families while 32 percent were from the marital families. 82 percent of those with family history had worked with their family members when they began working as domestic workers. Some of them were working as domestic workers from the age of six or seven along with their mothers, either in Delhi or before the migration from other cities such as Calcutta.

When we asked women who had worked with their mothers as children about choosing domestic work when older, they shared that they did not even consider any other option when they needed to work after marriage. Familiarity with this work helped them in their decision. In their view, other options such as factory work require some level of education and offer inflexible working hours. In some cases, women had worked as domestic workers during their childhood and continued the work after marriage. In such cases, the only shift often is from full-time work to a part-time work. For example, Shanti came from Jharkhand at the age of sixteen and worked as a live-in domestic worker. Many years after marriage, when she could not meet the expenses of her three children with only her husband's wages, she began working as a part-time domestic worker.

“ I was married at the age of seven but continued to stay with my parents. My father died after sometime. My elder brother created a tense atmosphere at home due to a property dispute. My mother and younger brother had no money and were in a tough situation. Then my in-laws came and took me from my mother's home. I was left with a family in Calcutta to do all their household work. I was 8 years old.

My employer was nice. The money was collected on a monthly basis by my mother-in-law or my husband. But my mother brought me back saying that I am very young. My husband told us that he does not want me to come back. I stayed with my mother for some time. But her financial situation was so bad...I worked in someone's cattle shed for which I was not paid any money but given some food. Then with the help of others' who worked in Calcutta, I found work as a live-in worker in Calcutta and went there.

An employer brought me to Delhi when I was a little over 9 years of age. After that another domestic worker got me a job with a foreigner. Then I went to Bhagalpur with them. I had grown up by the time I returned to Delhi. I then worked as a live-in for many years in different households. I married someone of my choice. Within two years of my marriage, a son was born but soon my husband died. I returned to the village with my son. But the financial situation at home was bad. So I came back to Calcutta and got some assistance from a charitable organisation...I left him with my mother when he started walking and eating rice. I took up a job in Calcutta for ₹80 per month. I gave the entire amount to my mother...Got another job for ₹125...Then I got a chance to come to Delhi after 3 years to work with a prominent business family. By this time, my son was 3-4 years old. I left him at home after getting him admitted into a school...I was given a certificate from these employers when I left their household... I bought a jhuggi and then got this plot after the first one was broken down. When he was in class 10, my son told me over the phone that his grandmother was not willing to keep him. I got to know that he had stopped his education. I told him to come to Delhi but he would have to earn. He was not ready to work but finally got into construction work. I had to leave my live-in work and started working as a part-timer so that he could live with me... All these years were fine as my son also earned well. But then my son and his wife started living separately and have gone to the village. So now I need to earn more money for myself... I also sell petticoats... Now I get tired with commuting and try to look after myself as there is no one to look after me...We should have four holidays in a month but Indian employers don't give us that. I had once worked with Chinese employers who gave me four days off in a month...I will work till I can but realize that I will have to go to my son when I have no energy to work...". Mohini, 50 years old.

3.2 Details of work and wages

Domestic workers in the sample work in a total of 1,958 households. They continue to work in some households over a long period of time, though the narratives indicate that they are forced to leave if the employer moves house or, in a few cases, when employer does not increase wages. A worker working over a long time period might have a combination of older and newer households, while a relatively new worker will have a different profile. The details are given below.

Table 5: Employment in current households

Number of years	Percentage
Less than 3 years	42
3-6 years	21
6-9 years	12
More than 9 years	25

The most common form of domestic work done by part-time workers was sweeping and mopping (done by them in 75 percent of the households); washing dishes (in 60 percent households); washing clothes (in 35 percent households); dusting (in 16 percent households); and cooking (in 16 percent households). Other forms of work, though only in a small percentage of households (ranging from 0.1 percent to 2.5 percent) included chopping vegetables, washing bathrooms, folding clothes, taking care of children, ironing clothes, making dough, shopping, making rotis, doing *malish* (body massage) (0.2 percent) and preparing tea.

Table 6: Number of times the domestic worker visits to complete the task

Number of times that a worker works in a household	Percentage
Once a day	65.5
Twice a day	31
Three times a day	0.2
Full day	0.3

Wages were primarily fixed on the basis of the rate of the area. The number of times any task was performed during the day and the time taken were also taken into consideration while fixing wages. Detailed interviews with workers indicated that initially other workers helped them fix the wages but some workers agreed for lesser wages as any amount of money helped them tide over their need for earning. Once they had an understanding of the rate and its calculation, they negotiated wages with employers on the basis of number of members in the household and the size of the house. Significantly, all workers were of the view that their wages were not commensurate to the labour.

In our sample, the average wage was ₹2194 with the range varying from ₹200 to ₹8000 per month. It has been noted that there is a socio-cultural hierarchy of work with cooking at one end of the spectrum and cleaning tasks, especially cleaning of toilets, at the other end. Majority of the households (71 percent) paid in the range of ₹200 - 400 for cleaning tasks such as sweeping and mopping, 71 percent households paid in the range of ₹200 - 400 for washing dishes, 43 percent households paid between ₹400 - 600 for washing clothes and 15 percent households paid in the range of ₹600 - 800 for cooking, while 38 percent households paid more than ₹800 per month.

The link between caste and type of task undertaken by the domestic worker clearly indicates a change from the traditional notions of purity as 55 percent of those who cook belong to the Scheduled Castes. Further, of those who cook, 42 percent were from UP and 28 percent from West Bengal. Do the employers ask the caste of the worker before employing her? Or is the region of her origin of any significance? We will explore this in the section on employers.

Though it did not emerge as a common practice, some workers took up short-term work as replacement workers that could be for a day or a few weeks. Some workers used this option when they returned from the village after a long gap. They did this form of work until they found regular work. For instance, a worker in her 60s lost her work due to long break when she had gone to her village. On her return, she started with replacement work as it ensured immediate payment. Another worker in her 40s worked in a few houses at the time of the interview. Instead of waiting to find more work, she began doing replacement work saying that she gets paid instantly and has money for daily expenses. After a few days of doing this form of work she decided not to take up more jobs as this flexibility allowed her to work according to her needs. Such workers charged according to the rate of the area.

There were no norms about extra payment for work that was not covered in the initial verbal agreement. It is critical to note that 48 percent of workers in the sample undertook unpaid extra work like buying milk or minding children

for a short period of time. When we probed this issue, workers expressed that the problem was not with small extra jobs but big tasks such as cleaning the house thoroughly at festival time, or washing a large number of dishes when the employers had guests. In our study, 69 percent of the employers did not pay any extra money when they hosted parties or had house guests. Similarly, there were no fixed norms about timely payment of wages. Domestic workers remarked that they find it tough when employers do not pay wages on time as they need money for rent, school fees or to pay the neighbourhood shop. This was especially the case with those workers whose employers (9 percent employers) paid wages after the 10th of the following month and of these, 38 percent employers paid wages only after being reminded by the domestic worker. 31 percent employers did not pay wages if they went out for a few weeks/months.

Average family income of the sample was ₹5826 per month, varying anywhere between ₹1000 to ₹26,700/month. Domestic workers in the sample contributed 41 percent to the family income. Because of their significant contribution, delayed or non-payment of wages disrupted the expenses of the workers' household. This was compounded by the fact that most of their husbands also worked in the informal sector with irregular incomes.

A few workers asked their employers to increase their wages but were often told that the employers' salaries had not increased and hence it was not possible to increase wages. Other employers felt that the wages were appropriate for the work they did while others asked them to leave if they found the wages inadequate. A few workers reported that they left such households even if they had worked there for over ten years only after they found a better paying employer. In the sample only a small number of employers gave increments.

3.3 Leave

Table 7: Leave negotiated with domestic workers (out of 86 percent employers who decided about leave with domestic workers)

Days of leave	Employers percent
1	4
2	75
3	8
4	10
More than 3	3

Though 10 percent households gave four days of paid leave in a month, only 12 percent of them gave a weekly off. 60 percent of employers deducted wages for taking more leave than the number that was part of the agreement. As in other cases, the decision depended on the employer as she may deduct for one extra day, or not deduct even for ten days of leave. Other patterns included no formal leave agreement but taking leave when required, while some did not take leave unless they had an emergency as they preferred to be out of their homes for a few hours every day. But a section of those who did not take leave voiced that they should get monetary compensation in lieu of the leave not taken.

From the narratives of domestic workers, it was clear that issue of leave was limited not only to the number of days of leave in a month but also the leave taken due to their own illness, marriage in the family, visit to their native place, and so on. Other aspects related to leave included unwillingness of employers to give leave, employers' anger at leave without prior permission or information (even in case of own illness). In some cases they had to cook meals in advance or wash all the dishes piled up after coming back to work. In some cases, domestic workers sent their daughters' to work when they were on leave. In effect, such employers did not give any monthly off to such workers.

Table 8: Leave taken by domestic worker for family members' illnesses

Leave taken	Percentage
Take leave	72
Go to work after arranging medicine	25
Other family member takes care	1
Do not go for the second round of work	1
Not applicable (new workers/no instances of illness in family since taking up work)	1

In case of illness of family members, majority took leave though more than 25 percent went to work after making arrangements for medicine. Similarly, in event of their own illness, 87 percent took leave when they were unwell but 11 percent went to work after taking medicines. The remaining 2 percent said that their daughters worked instead of them or they only did partial work. It is

noteworthy that 20 percent workers had lost work due to illness at some point or another.

66 percent of workers in the sample took long leave and 52 percent of them offered substitute replacement worker in the hope of continuing their work on their return from leave. Most workers (78 percent) said that they give an approximate date of returning while 20 percent give an exact date of returning to work - workers travelling with train bookings for the return journey, or those who have to return for their children's school give the exact date of rejoining work.

A few workers shared that when they went on long leave, the substitute or replacement worker took up their work for lesser wages leaving the original worker without her job on return. About 2 percent workers had left their households due to dissatisfaction with working conditions.

By and large, most workers expressed dissatisfaction with the leave structure and considered four days off in a month as a fair leave structure. Some said that the weekly off should be on Sundays as their families were also at home. A few domestic workers also thought that apart from their regular leave, they should get leave on festivals.

3.4 Facilities and benefits

In this section, we explore the nature of the benefits and facilities provided by the employers and whether they have a significant impact on the lives of the workers.

Table 9: Loans taken by domestic workers from employers (out of 78 percent workers who take loans from employers)

Monthly deduction from wages	96%
Extra work/work without wages/pay off in one instalment	4%

On the basis of survey and in-depth interviews, we found that the only significant benefit provided to domestic workers was an interest-free loan. Some workers got loans up to ₹5000. Of the survey sample, 78 percent domestic workers took loans from employers and 96 percent of these workers got loan amount deducted from their monthly wages. Others worked extra hours in lieu of the loan amount, paid off the entire amount when some other family member got

her/his wages. Some workers took loans from the market on interest as well with an interest rate between 2 percent to 10 percent. These loans were taken in their husband's home for household needs though the domestic workers contribute in repaying them. These loans were primarily taken for health issues, household expenses and social responsibilities such as marriages and death ceremonies. Other reasons included expenses for a trip to the village, construction of houses, buying land/house, and school fee of children.

66 percent domestic workers got old utensils and/or clothes from their employers, especially for their children. All workers expected their employers to give them old clothes. In fact, those who did not get them were quick to point out this out to their employers! Another article given to workers were old newspapers that the worker sold to the scrap dealer and earned some money. 34 percent of the sample did not get this benefit and were often sarcastic about it. A worker pointed out that some employers would not give away old papers or old clothes so as to exchange them for steel utensils! Some workers working since a longer period also shared that earlier employers gave them sarees but now most employers do not wear them and hence have no old ones to give to domestic workers. Some got food articles on a regular basis while few got left-over food. Employers often gave medicines for common ailments but in an exceptional case, provided treatment for a prolonged illness or took the worker (or her family member) to the doctor themselves. We came across only a two employers who assisted a worker to open a bank account or got her an insurance policy. In a few cases, employers had given the domestic worker a steel almirah or boxes that were not of any use to them.

70 percent households allowed their domestic workers to use a toilet in their house while 30 percent did not. Of the 70 percent who allowed the use of a toilet, 40 percent households had a separate toilet for domestic workers while in 60 percent households the domestic workers used a toilet that was part of the main household. Few domestic workers did share that they used the toilets without the permission or knowledge of the employers. But domestic workers working in large apartment complexes drew attention to the fact that the toilet that they had access to a common toilet used by guards and drivers as well. They were reluctant to use these toilets as they were also used by men and were generally dirty.

A majority of households offered tea and snacks to domestic workers while 23 percent did not. In most cases, employers did not offer while other domestic workers refused it. A few domestic workers who were unable to carry food from home and did not get tea or snacks in any of the households stayed hungry the whole day while those who could afford it, bought food from the local eateries.

A domestic worker in mid 40s came from Bengal to Madanpur Khadar to live with her brother and mother after the death of her husband. She leaves for work at 6.30 A.M. in the morning when food is not yet prepared. In her experience, even if she asks her employers, none of them give her any food. She manages to eat something only when she has money to buy it.

As in the case of all issues discussed so far, there was no uniformity in the gift and bonus given to the workers at the time of festivals. In many cases, workers received gifts only after working for a year. A worker shared that despite working in a household for 20 years, she had never been given more than ₹100 at festivals. Another worker who had worked in a household for 20 years reported that she received ₹500 at festivals.

Most of them were given an inexpensive saree or salwar kurta cloth piece in the range of ₹100 - 200 while others were given sweets and/or steel utensils. Many got a used saree instead of a new one. Some workers ridiculed their employers by saying that they give gifts only because they have to! None of the workers received a bonus at festival time. Those workers who were aware of the norms and practices in factories were of the view that they should get a bonus while a few expressed that they should get a big gift like a kitchen mixer or a cooler. They compared their gifts with those of factory workers. A few exceptional employers gave cash gifts in the range of ₹500 – 1000. Similarly, even when they stopped working for some employers (especially when the employer moves house), some workers continued to meet their employers and were given gifts on special occasions such as weddings in the family of either the worker or the employer.

In case of a personal crisis in the workers' family, about 32 percent of the employers provided her with financial assistance (other than a loan) to tide over the expenses. Similarly, on special occasions in the family of the worker such as a wedding or *mundan* (ceremony in which the head of a young child is shaved) only a few employers gave gifts as can be seen in the following table.

Table 10: Gifts given by an employer on a special occasion in a workers’ family

22 percent employers give gifts to their domestic workers on a special occasion in the workers’ family. Of these:	
Employers who give gifts	86 percent
Workers ask for a gift	22 percent
Gifts not given to new workers	2 percent

It is thus clear that no benefit from the employer can be taken as a matter of right. It is uncommon for workers to receive assistance with the school fee of their children. The benefits given to the domestic worker are not uniform and depend on the good will of the employer.

3.5 Social security concerns

As indicated earlier, a majority of workers in the sample were in their reproductive age or had young children. Long absence from work due to pregnancy and childbirth often lead to loss of income for them that they could ill afford. Further, as married domestic workers contributed 41 percent of the family income and their wages were often the only regular source of income in their families. Most of them returned to work at the earliest possible opportunity. 32 percent workers from our sample had children less than 9 years of age (i.e. pregnant in the last 10 years).

Table 11: Work during pregnancy (out of 32 percent pregnant domestic workers in the last 10 years)

Stage of pregnancy till which they worked	Percentage
Less than 6 months	10
6-8 months	44
9 th month	46

Besides working till late stages of the pregnancy, more than 38 percent returned to work in the first three months after childbirth. In addition to the loss of wages, they either took loans to meet the expenses of childbirth, or used their savings. The cycle of taking loans thus continued due to lack of any social security provisions given by the employers or the state. Besides pregnancy and childcare, workers also had to take breaks due to illness or accidents.

Domestic workers provide important care services to households without being able to access any such services for their own children. In our sample, 8 percent workers left their children alone at home, 30 percent were looked after by an older sibling (96 percent of whom are older sisters), 16 percent were looked after by other family members, 15 percent by neighbours and the remaining 31 percent went to school. Many workers interviewed by us stated that they chose to work less than they potentially could so as to return home to care for their children. Workers increase their workload once their children are older. Similar trends have been observed in a study undertaken by SEWA in Ahmedabad.⁹

12% of the domestic workers in the sample were over 50 years of age.

Another major concern expressed by workers in our sample was the insecurity of old age. For younger workers, it was a worry for the future while for workers in their 50s and above, it was an immediate concern. Nearly 12 percent of our sample was above 50 years of age, including the 4 percent who were 60 or above. A majority of them continued working as they had no other option for sustenance. One older worker said she would continue to work to avoid being dependent on her sons. All workers in the fifties and above were concerned and anxious about their ability to earn as they grow older. Some expressed that they would have to think of other options as they have no 'pension'. While most had no alternate plans to earn livelihood, a few have worked out options such as opening a small shack-shop. The older domestic workers were either single women or their husbands had in poor health. Their wages were the only source of income available to them.

The common thread in their narratives was that of fatigue, helplessness and lack of alternatives. For instance, a 56-year-old widowed worker from the state of Tamil Nadu, working since approximately 25 years, said that she got tired with work and the commuting. She categorically stated that in the absence of pension, she will have to continue working even in old age. She hoped to open a shop in the area around her house once she found it tough to commute and work. Her son lives in Delhi with his own family and took care of her during illness but she would not like to shift to his house. Another worker in her early 50s shared that it is imperative for her to work as her husband had stopped working after an accident. Though her son suggested that she stopped working, she prefers to work rather than being dependent on the son. She added that going out to work also gives her a reason to step out of her home on a daily basis.

A domestic worker from Tamil Nadu in her fifties said that she joined domestic work to escape her marriage with a man who constantly beat her up. The subsequent death of her son has forced her to continue working though she does not have the physical energy now to undertake the daily commute to work. Though the family would be receiving compensation for her son's death, she added that the money would go to her daughter-in-law. She does not want to live with her daughter due to social norms and has no other option but to continue working. She said that she has no alternate plans to earn her living.

Are older domestic workers given any special consideration or benefits? The workers shared that at most, some employers allowed older workers to rest after work in their house. None of the older workers received any wage increment in the last few years. Owing to frequent absence of work due to ill health, they are not able to retain their jobs and slid further into a more informal system of replacement work, making the worker more financially vulnerable. None of these workers were given any wage hikes in the last few years. The employers instead told older workers that they were lucky to have some form of employment.

Some old domestic workers prefer to work as replacement workers as that allows them to take time off due to illness or visits to the village.

3.6 Displacement and relocation

As discussed in the introduction, people were relocated to Madanpur Khadar when sections of it were surrounded with agricultural fields with inadequate water supply, public transport and public toilets.

Menon-Sen and Bhan (2008) have shown that displacement and relocation to far-flung areas accelerates the process of feminisation of poverty as women are affected much more than men because reduction of income and decline in living standards. Women have to spend more time securing water and rations, dealing with illness and maintaining their homes. In addition, women and the girls in the area have to deal with the constant threat of violence in public spaces. This, along with commuting difficulties, has serious economic and social consequences on their lives as they are unable to attend school, work and move around the city. Relocation pushed many residents, especially women, into a permanent state of poverty.

Similarly, people in Madanpur Khadar were relocated from central parts of Delhi about 10 – 15 kilometers away from their earlier homes and workplaces. A large number of the domestic workers continued to work even after relocation as the wages were important for their survival. In this context, the time and money taken to reach work increased substantially. It also left them with less time at home and increased their fatigue levels. Further, to cover the commuting expenses, some of them were forced to increase the number of households. On the other hand, those with young children were forced to reduce work as they had to get back to care for them.

When discussing relocation, most workers cited commuting as the toughest part of their working life after shifting to Madanpur Khadar. Many of them were not used to commuting by bus as they had earlier walked to their employers' homes. There was no public transport in the initial few months and gradually a few buses, though irregular in service, started operating in Madanpur Khadar. The journey was long, tough and made some road sick. While many workers got used to it over time, others had a tougher time coping. A worker now in her early thirties said that the fatigue of the commute took a toll on her health and finally her work. For others the lack of a proper home meant that their belongings were insecure. For instance, the worker referred to above in this paragraph shared that she went to work leaving an older child to look after all belongings kept in the open. Thefts were common. Workers who were the primary earning members did not think of taking leave for the fear of losing their jobs. Another worker in her early thirties recalled that she stopped working for two households as she wanted to be back in time for her children. Other workers left children alone all day – children either roamed around all day or were even locked inside the homes. Some children, especially older girls, had to leave school as there was no school for older girls in Madanpur Khadar. Those who could afford to rent homes closer to their place of work did so and shifted to Madanpur Khadar after three years gap once the RTVs became regular.

After relocation to Madanpur Khadar, the time spent in commuting increased considerably. Many domestic workers recounted that they would be often late for work and hence lost jobs. Some workers with 20 years of work in the same household also lost work as they could not reach their workplaces on time.

We asked the workers about the assistance that they had received from their employers at the time of relocation. Most workers were not assisted by their employers at the time of relocation to Madanpur Khadar. A few workers shared that their employers gave them loans or cash. Some employers gave leave with

wages for a few days, or gave old woollens and bedding, old door frames, taps and food. In a rare case, a worker did not work for two years, but the employer sent her wages every month. In some other cases, the employers increased wages to cover the commuting cost. However, these were experiences only of a few workers and not the norm.

3.7 Commuting

Most workers used public transport to commute to work. Even if they worked in the most adjacent residential area, the distance is was too long to walk. A large majority of domestic workers used RTV while a smaller number also travelled by shared auto rickshaws or vans. Some of them used both while almost all of them had to walk a certain distance every day. 44 percent of the sample walked for about half an hour every day and 32 percent walk for more than 30 minutes. The remaining 24 percent walked for less than half an hour. Most workers also spent at least 30 minutes waiting for transport. The cost of commuting was high and domestic workers spent an average of 14 percent of their wages in commuting.

Table 12: Average daily cost of commuting both ways

Cost of commuting in ₹	Percent of domestic workers
0-8	.4
8-16	42
16-24	49
24-32	7.5
32-40	.4
> = 40	.6

As described above, the experience of commuting has to be viewed in the context of displacement and relocation. They gradually learnt to handle the physical discomfort, time taken and the sexual harassment. Most of them felt safer when commuting in a group and this became a practice, especially for those who left early in the morning. With reference to their work, commuting was the biggest problem cited by them.

So far the report has provided an understanding of the working conditions of domestic workers. Most of the workers in the sample entered domestic work as it was the most viable option requiring no specific skills. Issues of personal safety and childcare of their children are also addressed by the nature of work place and its timings. Also, age is not a limitation as young or old both can

perform this work. The contradiction lies in a 'home' being a place of work which they perceive as 'safe' but also lends to their invisibility and lack of recognition as workers.

The lack of standards in terms of wages and leave structure is indicative of the arbitrariness of decisions that generally favour employers. Workers stand to lose as they are subject to wage deduction for extra leave, or put in extra work hours before or after their leave. This is also a loss of wages when employers go out for few weeks/months. Employers often cite that domestic workers gain from benefits that they get in kind. On probing the issue, it is clear that benefits are often in kind such as receipt of old newspapers and old clothes that do not total up to a significant amount in cash. A few workers are given gifts on special occasions in their families or on festivals.

As discussed earlier, the pressure on workers to earn forces them to work late into their pregnancy or resume work soon after childbirth with little rest or recovery. Lack of social security forces older domestic workers to continue work. All these concerns, as shown above, are to be viewed in the context of the urban scenario of poverty, the brunt of which is borne by women.

4. Respect and dignity



The notion of respect for domestic workers has different facets - respect within the family for their work and by extension, to them. Do they need to hide their work from their families? Does the extended family in the village know about their work? Does it lead to problems to arrange marriages for their daughters? Equally critical is their perception of the respect that they get from their employers. How do the employers and their family members treat domestic workers? Is access to toilets and using the same dishes as that of the employer an indicator of their dignity? This section explores the notion of respect and dignity.

4.1 Self and family's perceptions of domestic work

"Majboori main yeh kaam liye kyonke ghar me jaroorat the...doosre ke jhootan saaf karna kisko accha lagta hai..." (I took up this work as I had no other option...who likes to work clean dishes used by others?).
38-year-old domestic worker on her work.

Interviews with domestic workers indicate that there is no gap in the workers' perceptions of themselves and the way society or employers' perceive them. To begin with, many workers shared that initially they found their work very demeaning. This is linked to the cultural notion of dirty work whereby washing dishes is considered to be a lowly and menial task performed by the lower castes. Though it is not strictly observed in urban India now, cultural notions can be all pervasive. From the workers' perspective, they do this menial work

for lack of choices. As a 31 year old domestic worker hailing from Uttar Pradesh shared, *“bahut bura laga tha shuru mein... doosre ke jhootan saaf karna”* (When I started cleaning dishes used by others, I felt awful). Similarly, a 38 year old worker whose mother had worked as a domestic worker stated, *“Majboori mein yeh kaam liye kyonke ghar me jaroorat the... doosre ke jhootan saaf karna kisko accha lagta hai...”* (I took up this work as I had no other option... who likes to work clean dishes used by others?). Another worker in her mid fifties who has been working as a domestic worker since the last 12 years considered it to be demeaning but found it better than stealing.

Workers from different age groups shared their experiences during the course of the research. In many cases, their husbands were against their working per se, though not specifically against domestic work. A few started working after they convinced their husbands that the family needed the money while some others started working without the approval of their husbands. They add that the attitude of their husbands changed once they realised that it was safe to work in someone’s home as against a factory where workers have to interact constantly with men and work for longer hours. Many workers felt that by bringing in money regularly, their respect in their own household had gradually increased. Paid domestic work clearly allowed them to stay within the patriarchal notions of respect and honour as the worker interacts only with women employers and could also give the family some time.

Some workers had hidden their vocation from their native families in the village (or even in the city) as traditionally women do not work outside their homes. Others had not shared the nature of their work. As a worker in her thirties said, *“Humare yahan aurat ka kaam karna accha nahin mante. Aadmi ki izzatpar aanch aati hai.* (In our community, it is not considered appropriate for women to work. It reflects poorly on the stature of our men). In such cases, they do not allow their daughters to work as domestic workers and do not reveal their own status while fixing the marriages of their daughters. In some cases, the nature of the work per se is the problem. Instead of revealing their identity as domestic workers, they claim to work in schools or factories. Some workers hide it from their marital families but share it with their natal families, while others are mocked at for working as a domestic worker. As a 56 years old domestic worker from Tamil Nadu pointed out that, *“My family laughs that I went to Delhi to work in others’ homes”*. In some cases, if the immediate family knows, the worker requests them not to share with the extended family.

It is significant to point out that a majority of workers with a history of domestic work did not perceive it as disgraceful or undignified. Women who had no other support systems also did not view it as a humiliating or shameful. Older women, especially widows, and women whose husbands were alcoholics or unwell did not hide the nature of their work and were not bothered about others’ perceptions.

Yet, do they consider it as work or a job? As discussed earlier, most workers were of the view that they took up this 'work' as they had no other option. Of the surveyed domestic workers, 70 percent considered their work to be a job while the remaining 30 percent did not. Those who considered it as a job gave a range of reasons for doing so. To begin with, it enabled them to earn money but most were quick to point out that it was not similar to jobs at a factory, office or school. Domestic work gave them neither respect nor the benefits associated with office jobs such as bonus or pension. For instance, as a worker in her late forties from Maharashtra said, it is a job as she earns but it is poorly paid. Yet, she said, less wages are better than sitting at home. Similarly, a 40 year old worker from Bihar shared that though it is not a well paid and dignified job but it enabled her to meet her expenses in Delhi. Some workers added that they had no pride in their work.

“Domestic work is not like a job but it’s like daily wage labour...one day you have work and not the next day...and employers also change”.
A domestic worker in late thirties.

Those who did not consider it to be a job argued that cleaning homes and dishes is not work. This, as discussed earlier, is considered as an extension of women’s work outside her own household that is remunerated but considered to be a lowly task. All those who did not like their work cited this to be a significant reason for their dislike. Another reason for not considering it a job was the lack of security. It is unstable--plenty today but none tomorrow. A worker from Madhya Pradesh compared this to daily wage labour, “*yeh kaam dehadji jaisa hai, aaj hai to kal nahin*” (this work is like daily wage labour). In this context, it is significant to note that they may treat it as a job as it enables them to earn money but it does not give them any dignity or associated perks such as bonus, pension, or maternity leave. A majority of them said that they would instead like to work as school *ayah* (nanny/helper). A few said that they would like to be self-employed, maybe as fruit or vegetable sellers and even work in a factory. Most of them did not want their daughters to enter this profession.

4.2 Treatment by employers

Besides the respect that the worker gives to her own work and that she receives from her own family, the respect that they get from their employer is critical. In the survey, we asked workers about the treatment from employers. 95 percent said that they are treated with respect and in a pleasant manner while only 5 percent said that the employers were always angry and disrespectful. In some households, employers spent some time talking with them while in others the conversation with them was limited only to work. Two and a half percent workers reported facing verbal abuse while 0.3 percent workers had

faced physical violence. They shared similar experiences in the course of the interviews as well.

“Aunty’s (the employer) son always speaks with me using *gali* (foul language). She also talks to me using *tu* (an informal way of addressing but also considered to be rude by some). One day the son’s language was exceptionally foul – I could not take it anymore and raised my hand. Thereafter, both of them stopped using foul language”. A domestic worker in her forties.

A few workers shared that employers scolded them if they reached late or even used foul language. Some workers highlighted that employers do not like being answered back. A worker in her fifties shared that one of her employer’s always asked her to work faster which she was unable to do and often ended up having an unpleasant argument with the employer. Another worker in her forties said that one of her employer’s used abusive language and generally talked with disrespect. This stopped after the worker protested strongly. A worker in her forties was beaten up by her employer’s neighbour after a misunderstanding about throwing dirty water on the latter’s clothesline. The argument turned ugly and the police was called. Her employer asked her not to argue with the police. She maintains that she was beaten up for no fault of hers and no one apologised to her.

A domestic worker in her forties worked in a household that also employed a live-in worker. She assisted the live-in worker to find another job as the employer’s son was making sexual advances towards her. The support provided by the part-time worker annoyed the employer. The employer threatened to call the police and also hit her. The part-time worker was fired without payment of wages.

In all the above-mentioned cases, workers had no access to any help or complaint mechanism against abusive behaviour. The only option was to quit work at the abusive employer’s house. Yet, their need of money forces them to continue working. However, after working for a few years as a domestic worker and figuring out the dynamics of changing jobs, workers do not like to work in households that do not treat them well. They start looking for work and quit as soon as they have options.

Most workers shared that employers test them from time-to-time, especially in the beginning of their work by leaving valuable items around in the house. At times they face theft accusations as well. 2.3 percent workers reported having faced a theft accusation of stealing some food items, cash or jewellery. They

reported that in all these cases, either valuables were found later or another worker was found guilty. All these workers stopped working for households once their name was cleared but they could not lodge their protests against false charges. The only option was to stop working at that house.

Another important aspect related to dignity is access to toilets in employers' homes. We have already noted that domestic workers in our sample used toilets only in 70 percent households and of these, in 60 percent households domestic workers use employers' toilets while 40 percent households have a separate facility. Separate dishes were kept for 22 percent of the workers, sometimes under the kitchen sink. More than 50 percent of the surveyed domestic workers ate their lunch (carried by them) at their employer's homes. The employers did not object to their eating food brought from home by the domestic worker. But, in doing so, domestic workers did not use any dishes and also ate their food sitting on the floor. A small percentage also ate it under the steps of multi-storied apartments, others in parks and few others with other workers such as the *dhobi's* (person who washes and irons clothes) family. Many find denial of access to neighbourhood parks demeaning. Though only a small percentage (13 percent) of workers reported not being allowed to sit in parks, they find it insulting and were vocal about it in our discussions with them.

4.3 Sexual harassment

It is widely recognised that women find it very difficult to report sexual harassment at workplaces and are forced to remain silent. This could be because women are often blamed for the harassment. The power dynamics between employers and employees and fear of discrimination or dismissal also ensure they keep silent. Lack of awareness of laws, little confidence in complaint mechanisms or stigma due to breach in confidentiality can also be responsible for the silence (Sanhita 2007). Though there is no legislation yet on sexual harassment in India, the Supreme Court Guidelines issued in the *Vishakha versus State of Rajasthan case (1997)* are followed. This landmark judgement gave this invisible crime a name and forced the state to acknowledge its prevalence in different types of workplaces. Subsequently, feminists, women's group and lawyers have been involved with the national Commission of Women to draft a bill on Sexual Harassment at Workplace Bill. However, the bill presented to the Parliament in 2010 does not include domestic workers. Officials argue that domestic workers were excluded due to the difficulties in proving sexual harassment in homes due to lack of witnesses in the home of accused. Along with domestic workers organisations, women's and lawyers groups have protested strongly against this exclusion¹⁰.

On the ground, the situation of domestic workers from backward sections of society is worse than women workers in the organised sector as they would find it harder to accuse the harasser and then prove the charges. Their economic vulnerability further forces them into silence. Some such cases have been taken up by activists¹¹. In 2009, a well-publicised case from Mumbai had a domestic worker accuse her film star employer of rape. Though the accused was sent to jail, the domestic worker later changed her stance and withdrew all charges. However, it is widely accepted among groups working with domestic workers, especially the live-in ones, that a majority of such cases are not reported and are often hushed up.

Likewise, cases of sexual harassment faced by part-timers are seldom reported. In the survey, we asked workers if there had been any instance of a male member of the employer's household saying or doing something that they did not approve¹². Six workers answered in the affirmative. These included instances of verbal abuse and sexually suggestive comments. When we asked them about the steps that they had taken thereafter, all of them responded that they stopped working for these households. The only recourse available to them amounts to loss of work and wages.

Given the varied nature of sexual harassment and the complexity involved in reporting complaints, we decided to explore the issue with part-time workers through Focus Group Discussions. It was important for us to explore whether domestic workers understood what constituted sexual harassment. Does the lack of support system force them into a silence (Sanhita 2007)? How do they handle it? Do they report it other members of the household? Or do they share it with other domestic workers?

Other women's organisations that have addressed the issue point out that domestic workers do not have the confidence or the forum to share their experiences of abuse¹³. The lack of any institutional support makes it more difficult to report sexual harassment. Besides, sexual harassment guidelines do not apply at 'home' workplaces¹⁴. When domestic workers protest against any form of sexual harassment against them, they are threatened with loss of employment or accusations of theft.

What constitutes sexual harassment? ¹⁵

- **Unwelcome or unwanted verbal, non-verbal, physical or visual conduct based on sex or of sexual nature**
- **Gender-based slurs, discrimination and insults – the acceptance or rejection of which affects**

women worker's employment

- **An intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive work environment**
- **Intersections with other issues based on the status of women workers, class, ethnicity, religion, nature of job etc.**
- **Rooted within other workplace harassments**
- **Abuse of power and/or authority**
- **Violation of human rights**

In our discussions with domestic workers on sexual harassment, most of them initially denied any sexual harassment in the households they work in. At the offset, some domestic workers said that sexual harassment does not happen unless one asks for it – that women provoke it either by the way they dress or behave. Some others refuted it and shared their experiences. In this process, we discussed different forms of sexual harassment with domestic workers, enabling them to recognise the subtle forms faced by them and also discussed strategies of handling it including screaming to draw attention of others in the household or the neighbours, discussing with other domestic workers, forming a group to confront employers and also approaching organisations such as Jagori.

In most instances shared with us, the sexual harassment faced was subtle. The most common experience shared was that of being stared at while working, especially while sweeping and swabbing floors. In similar cases, some workers shared that men of the households asked them to re-do the cleaning, especially of the floors, in the absence of the women employers. They reportedly faced this with male members of households across different ages, including older men. In one case, a domestic worker shared that an elderly man called her to work in the house. He asked her to step inside and not be scared. These words did not sound right to her and she soon realised that he was alone at home. She left immediately saying she would return when the *malkin* (woman employer) will be at home. On sharing this experience with other domestic workers, she was told that this particular man had behaved in a similar way earlier and for this reason no woman worked at that house for a long time. Even in Bangalore, Stree Jagruti Samiti noted that often older males had harassed workers especially those who they had to look after ¹⁶.

Our discussions revealed that older domestic workers may work in households only with men while the younger ones preferred not to. In some cases, their families did not allow them or they had heard of cases of sexual harassment in all-male households. A couple of workers also reported that they had decided not to work in these kinds of households after some bad experiences.

Anila is a domestic worker in early 20s. Her mother found Anila a job in a house where she herself had worked for many years. The man of the house, the male employer, asked Anila to chop some vegetables in his room. In her words, "...he asked me to go to his room and chop vegetables. When I started doing so, he put his arms on my back. I felt very awkward and scared. I left the vegetables and came to the kitchen. He said that he had not done anything to me. He then poured a glass of milk and I saw him putting some medicine in it. He asked me to drink it. I ran out of the back door and told my mother who later informed the malkin. I was scared to say anything as her husband was also standing there...I later told her the whole incident and also that I did not want to work there anymore".

Another kind of sexual harassment faced is in form of suggestive comments. A worker shared that male members of the household pass sexually suggestive comments such as expressing keenness to spend time with the domestic worker. She had experienced this personally and had also heard about similar incidents from other domestic workers. She later reported the incident to the woman employer who accosted her husband in front of the worker. Her husband remained silent but did not deny it. She finally stopped working for this household.

The only recourse they had was to stop working for these households and left once they found another job. In this case, the sexual harassment is directly linked to their economic vulnerability, as they fear that they would lose their jobs if they raised their voices. As discussed earlier, losing earnings from a household proves rather difficult.

Even historically, the chain of exploitation between poverty and gender has been intertwined in the realm of work. It is well known that in rural India the bond or contract that ties labourers to their masters implies an inclusion of services of the labourer's wife as well (Dube 2003). Besides being at the beck and call of the master's family for all kinds of household chores, low caste women often had to be 'available' sexually to the landlord. Agarwal (1994) also notes that in traditional agrarian relations, caste and economic oppression is closely linked to gender oppression. Women of lower caste sharecroppers/labourers had to be sexually available to the landlord and "their sexual harassment added to the symbolic subjugation of their families as well" (ibid: 439). This has been a silent aspect of their work. Raising a voice amounted to loss of livelihood which they could ill afford. In a similar vein, employers often sexually exploit women domestic workers. Complaining certainly leads to loss of jobs or counter-accusation of theft. Even in the case of theft accusation, the power equation lies in the favour of the employer as the worker has no structural support (or

is not aware of it) to complain either of the sexual harassment or of the false theft allegations.

In the above discussion on respect and dignity, it is important to note that even if workers did not view their own work as one with dignity, they expected their employers to speak and treat them with respect and dignity. When treated with indignity, few did attempt to question the employers but preferred to quit work there. It is clear that all decisions on how to treat the worker are completely in the hands of the employer – the manner of speaking, access to toilets, or using the same dishes. The hierarchy is spelt out even by employers who treat workers well as they set the boundaries of interaction. This aspect will be discussed more at length in the next section.



5. Employers' perspectives

As discussed earlier, the definition of workplace and the employer-employee relationship in the case of domestic work is unique. Even within the informal sector, the case of domestic work is different from rest of the sector as the workplace is a family's home and the relationship between the employer-employee is a subjective one that varies from case to case.

Meeting employers of domestic workers who were part of the study proved to be difficult. We asked domestic workers to give us the telephone numbers of their employers or get them for us. A majority of them refused saying that they did not want any repercussions on their work. Very few workers gave us the phone numbers. We clarified to the employers that our purpose was to gain insight into the employers' perspectives on domestic work in general and not their domestic worker. Except a couple of them, most employers were not keen to meet. As the next best option, we contacted other employers in the same neighbourhood to discuss the above-mentioned issues. Barring a few exceptions, we interviewed employers in those neighbourhoods where part-time domestic workers from Madanpur Khadar work.

5.1 Importance of domestic workers

We asked employers about the importance of domestic workers in their lives. Why do they employ domestic workers? Most employers were of the view that domestic workers ensured smooth functioning of the household as they take over time-consuming and tiring tasks. They added that Indian custom of freshly cooked food, its daily preparation and the equally arduous process of cleaning up the utensils needs assistance. Others pointed that weather requires

daily cleaning. Domestic workers become more important for households where women work outside the house and domestic workers take over the running of these tasks. Further, employers living in nuclear families or with young children are of the view that domestic workers are not only essential as support systems but are also provide emotional support as companions. They added that it is possible to hire domestic workers as they are easily available at affordable rates.

Significantly, few employers perceived that in our culture the household is not only the responsibility of women but in fact, men order women around. The women are able to take this workload only with the assistance of domestic workers. Others added that as someone else takes over the house, they have time for their children and themselves.

It is important to point out that some employers attributed altruistic viewpoint to hiring domestic workers as they "help poor women earn money". Another employer said that "...employing them does not cost us much and it helps a poor person as well".

"Those who do not employ a domestic worker are viewed disparagingly...". A middle-class employer on the domestic workers as status symbols.

Some employers also observed that employing domestic workers is now a lifestyle statement as it is considered odd not to keep one and instead do all housework oneself. An employer of modest means living in a middle-class locality shared that it is also a status statement to have a domestic worker. Those who do not employ a domestic worker are viewed disparagingly. An upper middle class employer observed that people view women who clean their own house rather oddly and assume that they cannot employ a worker owing to financial problems corroborates this statement. This aspect has also been noted by Ray and Qayum who observe that domestic workers in India not only perform the undesirable work that would be in the "... purview of women of the household, but in so doing, make it possible for the employers to aspire to and maintain middle-class status" (2009:9).

What are the criteria used while selecting a domestic worker? Except for a few employers who have elderly women in their families, all employers interviewed stated that they did not inquire about the caste of their workers. Nonetheless, a couple of employers were of the view that if possible, they would like to know the caste of their worker. Domestic workers corroborated that employers seldom asked their caste – if at all, an older family member may ask. Majority

of employers were of the view that in cities such as Delhi (our area of research was South Delhi), the importance of caste has declined over time, though religion may still be a criterion to select a domestic worker. Most of them were of the view that Hindu employers still prefer Hindu workers and similarly Muslim employers would select workers of the same religion.

All employers emphasised that cleanliness of the worker is of paramount importance while selecting a worker. Besides this, some added that they note the tone of the worker as they expect her to speak politely. When employing a new worker, they discussed rates according to the rate of the area, number of leaves in a month (leaves have to be taken with prior notice and permission), quality of work and the importance of punctuality and honesty. Almost all employers would like to have a worker who comprehends instructions properly and *jiske peeche nahin rehena padta hai* (a person who does not require constant supervision). Some employers said that more than the selection, the way in which employers' train them, to one's level of satisfaction, is important.

We asked the employers whether they had any regional preferences when selecting a domestic worker? Most employers stated that the personality and cleanliness of the worker is of more importance than the region. Some said that they did not prefer women from north Indian states as they found them lax with time, number of leaves and were talkative. The same employers pointed out that they prefer women from Bengal or the south as they are "more professional and not interested in wasting time chatting with the employers".

In response to a question about the change in nature of domestic work in the last thirty years or so, employers pointed out that workers used to be more responsible and dependable even though their work was more physically demanding. They were considered to be a part of the family and were not offended by the employers' admonishment. They added that scolding them in the current scenario might result in the worker quitting the job. Employers said that in earlier times workers were more honest than now. Sometimes to test them, they leave valuable items around to check whether the worker steals them or not. The nostalgia around 'servants' from their parents' generation surfaced regularly in their narratives.

Most employers did not appreciate the change in attitudes of domestic workers over time. The term 'loyalty' appeared often in their discussions, with hints that workers used to be more loyal earlier. They lamented that workers now demanded leave, more wages and respectful treatment from employers. Others observed that they now changed jobs frequently looking for better paying ones, had their preferences of employers and were also aware of their rights. Some employers used the term 'professional' but regretted the change to an

impersonal relationship. One employer even commented that the term *naukar* (servant) is used less frequently now and instead *kaamwali* (woman who works) is used indicating that they are now treated with more dignity than before. In the view of many employers, the demand for high wages was unjustified. They pointed out that workers want different forms of facilities and benefits but they have no similar sense of loyalty as they change their employers easily.

A few employers reflected on the current political understanding of domestic work. For instance, while discussing the notion of loyalty, one employer stated, "What we consider loyalty was actually a lack of choices. Earlier workers did not have an understanding as today. Now they are beginning to realise that they are workers with rights and have the option of leaving the house where they are not treated well". But she also added that they capitalise on the fact that all households need them. Another employer added that the change also depended on the culture of the city as well. For instance, in her view, the culture of Calcutta is very different from Delhi. She shared an observation that in present day Calcutta the tone used with domestic workers is authoritarian, which in her view, would not be accepted by workers in Delhi. She added that there is a need to change the authoritarian tone among employers in Calcutta. It is important to highlight here that some activists have observed that employers often do not want government intervention as they believe that the relationship between the domestic worker and employer is a personal and private one.

However, most employers were taken aback when we asked them if they considered domestic work to be skilled work and reflected before they answered. Some of them were of the view that they would consider cooking as skilled but not cleaning. Others felt that the workers even learn cleaning in the city as the style of cleaning in villages is very different. Few employers thought that they had to train the workers, especially the live-in worker. Most employers did not think it to be skilled – some did not give it the status of work. They added that they have become workers only because of compulsions and have no desire to learn, adding that it is a woman's work in the home and not an office. Most say that with training, if at all, the worker can improve only marginally better. A few employers thought that with training the workers might be able to manage their time better. However, all employers were sceptical of the rates that such workers would demand after such training.

5.2 Relationship between employers and domestic workers

The relationship between employers and domestic workers is a complex one. It often extends beyond that of the worker and employer as the workspace is a home and the two exchange personal notes and offer emotional support to each other.

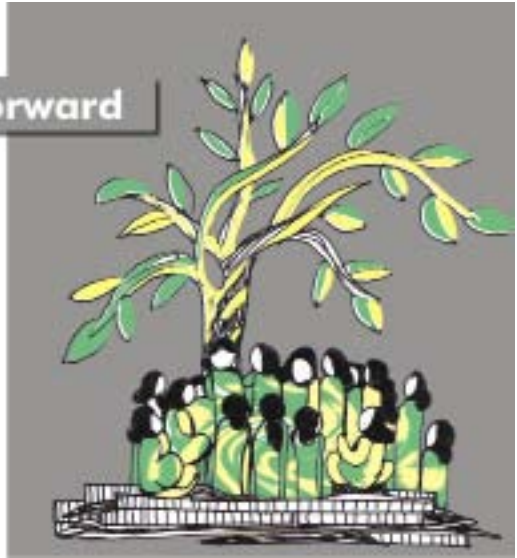
Employers pointed out that the relationship is very subjective and depended on the individuals involved. One employer said that her worker has been with her for 15 years. “She helped me raise my children and I have a special relation with her. I think as her employer I have to look after her family problems as well and give her leave when she wants. For her, working with me is a ‘security’. I look after her when she has fever or problems with her husband and pay her child’s school fees (₹ 20 per month). They also realise that and stay on with such employers. The relation is beyond wages...she is also a woman”.

Few others said that their workers offered them emotional support as they shared their problems with them. They talked to them for few hours every day as companions. Another employer said that even though they do not seek them out as companions, working over long periods of time brought them closer with better rapport. On the other hand, some employers said that they did hear out the problems of workers but did not share their own. Few others said that their conversations were related to work only.

As we have seen earlier in the section on benefits, even when they had stopped working for some employers (especially when the employer moved house), some employers encouraged their ex-workers to continue meeting them and gave gifts on special occasions such as weddings in the family of either the worker or the employer. In some cases, employers also paid the school fees (ranging from ₹ 20 – 100 per month), or gave them gifts (ranging from cash, clothes, utensils and a new cooking stove) at the time of weddings of their children. They added that they took care of some medical expenses as well. These could vary from brief illnesses to, in rare cases, an expensive surgery. However, as is the case with the entire discussion so far, it all depended on individual employers. The issue of the relationship blurred the work equation and workers often commented that employers get workers to do extra work just by speaking politely or affectionately. As Ray and Qayum argue, both look at their own benefits. It is difficult to ascribe it only in terms of exploitative relationships or that of ‘servitude’. It can also be an emotional tie but one where hierarchies of class and power are clear. Our research has shown that though interpersonal relationships between the two are an important aspect of domestic work, the employer always decides the boundaries of such relationships – the extent to which the domestic worker will be privy to their lives, or the extent of benefits to be provided. The hierarchy of the relationship is thus reinforced.

6. Way forward

Our study, along with existing research, has discussed different dimensions of domestic work. From the above account, it is clear that the dignity of domestic work and by extension, of domestic workers, is central to this discussion. Society does not consider it as dignified work and this is reflected in working conditions. These women are placed very low in



the social structure because of the little value ascribed to domestic work in our society. Very often, workers themselves consider their work as lowly and hence take no pride in it. The constantly changing urban scenario, with evictions and displacement, has affected their life, livelihood and, in turn, their dignity. The challenge, then, is to involve workers, unions and workers' organisations, employers and the state in this debate to identify steps to address the issues. There can be no straightforward solutions to the challenges except for each one taking responsibility to find a way forward to stop the systematic exploitation of domestic workers. One step could be to draw parallels from other workers in the care sector.

Activists and researchers have regularly pointed out that women workers face discrimination in the form non-recognition as workers, inequality of wages and denial of rights, especially in the unorganised sector. Similar conditions are manifest in the care sector, possibly because care is traditionally considered to be the work of women. As noted earlier in the report, in India care work is not recognised by society or the government. This can be seen in the case of domestic work, care work in anganwadis and nursing. Mazumdar notes that as with other women workers, these workers providing care face discrimination, anganwadi workers being a "concrete manifestations of discriminations" (Mazumdar 2007: 17). She further points out that women are chosen to be anganwadi workers as they socially considered ideal for the work of childcare. But she notes that being women is also responsible for their non-recognition as workers and are paid wages that are lower than any acceptable standards

in addition, "...because they are subalterns, they are treated with contempt by officials who command them, their sense of dignity thus undermined on a daily basis" (ibid: 17). The state considers them to be volunteers and provides them an honorarium instead of wages and hence has no responsibility of being an employer.

Yet, *anganwadi* workers have organised themselves and have struggled for legal recognition as workers, and demanded better standards of working conditions including wages and social security entitlements (Mazumdar 2007, Palriwala and Neetha 2009). Though few states have given some entitlements to these workers, the centre is yet to recognise them as workers.

Nursing is an example of women workers organising themselves in the care industry and successfully changing perceptions. In colonial India when nursing first started, it was viewed as menial, morally dubious and 'polluting' work performed by the lower castes. After independence, similar perceptions continued and the Indian state reinforced these perceptions by the recruitment of untrained or semi-trained nurses. Nursing continued to be seen as dirty and dangerous work. Over the years, professional organisations of nurses have lobbied and helped in improving social and economic status of nurses. In spite of significant changes in their status and self-perceptions, nurses recognise that the issue of status arises not only due to the nature of work but also due to low socio-economic status of women in India. Nursing in India is primarily a woman's profession. Moreover, collective bargaining is not perceived to be as effective in 'women's majority' professions. In addition, an internal hierarchy of graduate nurses, general nurses and midwifery has worked against their collective bargaining power (Nair and Healey 2006).

One of the major changes was the distinction made between unskilled and skilled tasks. The former is done by ward boys and *ayahs*. Dealing with sophisticated machinery, stricter admission norms and options of working in foreign countries in better conditions, including high salaries, led to further changes in their status. Legislation to standardise working conditions also improved their standing (ibid). These factors have been responsible in transforming nursing into a respectable profession. A similar transformation in perceptions of domestic work can lend dignity to this work. The workers, their organisations, employers and the state will have to be an integral part of this change.

Domestic work is not recognised as 'work' by the Indian government. The state does not value or recognise this work as a contribution to society and the economy. Trade unions and other organisations working with domestic workers have been pressurising the state for a shift in its policy on domestic work. As in the case of *anganwadi* workers, limited recognition means that the economic

value of non-familial care continues to be devalued (Palriwala and Neetha 2009). This is compounded by the fact that a workforce of women is constantly available to meet the rapidly growing demand. Poverty, lack of options and lack of information about organising forces these women to accept the working conditions.

Domestic work by children was banned in India when the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986 was amended in 2006. National labour laws do not protect adult domestic workers – they are excluded from the Factories Act 1948 (no. 63 of 1948), the Minimum Wages Act, No. 11 of 1949 and all other labour laws except for the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act of 2008.

Discussions on legislations, as noted above, have been ensuing in the country since the 1980s. Various legislations have been drafted over time by National Commission of Women and by unions or groups of activists. Yet domestic workers were not included in the Minimum Wages Schedule though, as mentioned earlier, some states have decided minimum wages. Even the inclusion of domestic workers in the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008 (Act 33 of 2008) took place after the intervention of the Supreme Court. The exclusion of domestic workers in the Protection of Women against Sexual Harassment at Workplace Bill, 2010, reflects the lack of interest to engage with the complexities of domestic work. Different organisations have strongly protested against this exclusion. As we have discussed earlier in the report, domestic workers are not able report sexual harassment and other forms of abuse or violations as they have neither the awareness nor the access to such mechanisms. Workers' organisations can educate and support domestic workers to fight against any such abuse.

Philippines, Malaysia and Hong Kong include domestic workers in their national labour legislations (APWLD 2010).

But none of the workers we met during the course of the survey or the interviews knew about any organisation working with domestic workers in Delhi. Most workers responded by saying that they had never given it a thought and had no idea of any such organisation. Our team members then shared with them about the work of such organisations and unions. Many workers were sceptical about the success of such an organisation in Delhi given that workers were

not united and agreed to work for lesser wages than the rate of the area. Others said that organisations such as ours should form groups and fight for their rights on their behalf. According to them, it is imperative for employers to participate in discussions with such organisations as they decide the wages or remove workers working since long time duration. They added that the government should also make rules and regulations on domestic work that should be televised. The central aspect of the awareness should include raising awareness of the domestic workers about the rules and regulations. They note that the newcomers need to be apprised about the rate of work.

Others expressed reservations that employers will fire them if they become members of groups that advocate higher wages. Two workers said they did not know about workers forming any groups but were aware of their employers meeting in the parks on certain days to discuss wages and other terms of employment of domestic workers! Most workers expressed hopes for higher wages after the formation of workers' groups. A few workers from Tamil Nadu knew about the unions in Chennai but not in Delhi. A worker from Rajasthan said that domestic workers should strike for a few days so that "they will learn to value our work".

In other cities, workers have expressed reluctance to follow a formal work structure as demanded by the unions as it will take away certain flexibility that is critical for their personal lives. For instance, workers are sometimes reluctant to join unions as they demand standardised wages which they may not get while other workers agree to work for lower wages. This proves to be a setback for women who are unionised and ask for higher wages. Similarly, they do not want a compulsory weekly off as they prefer to take holidays when they need. Unions or other workers' organisations will have to address these issues as well. The DWRC, for instance, proposes that all employers and domestic workers should have their own arrangement of 4 days off in a month.

Equally critical is the responsibility of the employer in recognising the importance of the domestic worker in their lives, give due recognition to their work and treat them with respect and dignity. Organisations and the government will have to involve employers in this discussion to make them aware of the rights of domestic workers. Given the long tradition of social inequality in this relationship, a combined effort by the state and workers organisations can be the first step in changing the nature of domestic work from that of class, hierarchy, gender and caste to a professional contract between domestic workers and their employers. This would be fraught with contradictions due to the multi-layered relationship between the two. Some organisations such as *Pune District Molkarin Sangathana* have attempted to address such issues through their family counselling centres where employers and domestic workers

come to resolve their problems and complaints. Besides resolving these problems, the organisation engaged employers in discussions on gratuity for workers. After initial resistance, the employers associated with them agreed to pay. Now domestic workers allied with the organisation are convinced not to accept jobs without gratuity (Thatte 2010).

The process of mobilising domestic workers is complex and long term. To begin with, this would involve empowering domestic workers. This is possible only when the right to form collectives is granted. The understanding of collective bargaining power can bring about this change as there has to be a sense of solidarity among them to challenge ill treatment or unfair wages. The low self-esteem can change only when they value their work. Corresponding to the process of empowerment has to be the building of an understanding of responsibility towards their work. This will facilitate a more professional attitude to their work. Rights and responsibilities go hand in hand by valuing their work with dignity and as a form of 'labour'. The collectives in the form of unions or organisations will, in turn, work towards demanding and implementing legislations. The onus thus lies on the state to protect domestic workers by law and enable them to join and form associations and unions. These rights must be publicised and supported by the state by ensuring that employers are aware of their workers' rights. Finally, the government's vote for a Convention at the International Labour Conference in 2011 would provide impetus to the entire movement in India.

End notes

¹The use of the term ‘domestic work’ and ‘worker’ in the report, as against ‘maid’ or ‘servant’, signifies our belief that it is a form of ‘work’ and the ‘worker’ has rights. The term domestic worker has been interchangeably used with worker in the report. In current literature, authors such as Ray and Qayum use the term ‘servant’ arguing that it is the term commonly used and that “... they treat the nexus of labor relations that is domestic servitude as an institution rather than occupational category... (2009: 4).

²NSSO 2005 data, as cited in Bhattacharya 2010.

³Ray and Qayum (2010) use the term ‘servant’ with the argument that domestic worker’ does not change the institution or relations of servitude. They consider this nexus of labour relations as an institution and not an occupational category.

⁴The second National Labour Commission in 2002 recommended that to calculate minimum wages, the standard working class family should be taken as one earner and three consumption units for one earner and his family consisting of his family and two children under 14 years. The earnings of women and children or adolescents should not be included. Specifications for minimum requirement of intake of calories, clothing, housing have been specified. The Supreme Court subsequently added that children’s education, medical requirements, provisions for old age, minimum recreation including festivals/ceremonies and marriages should be included in this calculation (Sinha and Bhattacharya 2010).

⁵Over the years, Jagori has provided modest fellowship support to individual women activists and grassroots action-researchers working in remote rural, tribal and urban poor areas with marginalised communities. This support enables feminist activists to initiate work on emerging development issues affecting women. For details see <http://jagori.org/our-activities/research/>

⁶Presentation by S. Bhattacharya (ISST study) on working conditions of domestic workers in the nine districts of Delhi presented at the Consultation organised by ILO, New Delhi with Civil Society and Trade Unions on a National Level Campaign towards the realization of a Convention for Domestic Work at the ILC (2010), May 2009, New Delhi.

⁷Researchers have noted that women’s organisations have not consistently taken up advocacy for domestic workers. As Paliwala and Neetha (2009)

state, “It has been suggested that the middle class background of the activists and their own dependence on hired domestic workers has made them hesitant in advocacy in this area” (ibid: 40).

⁸ Refers to a Jhuggi Jhopri (slum).

⁹ SEWA-ISST 2008, Socio-Economic Conditions of Domestic Workers in Ahmedabad, FES, New Delhi.

¹⁰ For details see Nandy, Amrita. ‘Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Bill: Justice or a cruel joke?’, Women’s Feature Service, 6 December 2010.

¹¹ Though such cases are seldom documented in the public arena, a recent film by feminist activist, Reena Kukreja, ‘Delhi Bound for Work’ captures such incidents. For details see <http://www.tamarindtreefilms.com/>

¹² In simple terms, sexual harassment can be defined as “unwanted and unwelcome behaviour based on gender” (Sanhita 2007:7).

¹³ Views shared by Geeta Menon of Stree Jagruti Samiti, Bangalore as cited in ‘Our criminal record goes against Shiney’ by Priya Ramani in [livemint.com](http://www.livemint.com) <http://www.livemint.com/2010/09/10213444/Our-criminal-record-goes-again.html> posted on 10 September, 2010.

¹⁴ The Sexual Harassment at Workplace Bill presented to the Parliament in November 2010 does not include domestic workers. “Officials argued that domestic workers were left out in view of the administrative difficulty in proving sexual harassment due to lack of witnesses and the effectiveness of the local committee in the home of accused”. Women’s and lawyers groups have protested strongly against this exclusion http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-11-05/india/28270118_1_complaints-committee-sexual-harassment-loss-in-career-opportunity

¹⁵ Sanhita 2007: 22

¹⁶ Observations shared by Geeta Menon.

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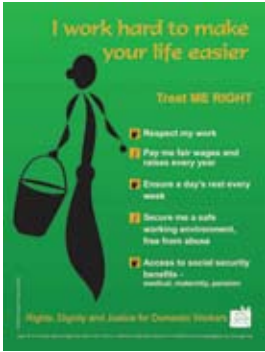
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The following advocacy materials on the rights of domestic workers has been produced by Jagori

1. Posters



2. Bookmarks



3. Home/Work : documentary film on voices of part-time domestic workers by Gargi Sen



Home/Work follows the lives of part-time domestic workers – a group comprising largely of migrant women from villages. Home/Work follows the women as they struggle for livelihood in the burgeoning urban centres of India. Invisible from the mainstream labour force and outside of all social security nets, the lives of these women begins to deconstruct the ideal notion of an Indian ‘home’ and ‘hearth.’ Home/Work tries to unravel some of the complexities and peculiarities of domestic workers in India by a re-looking at the issue of gender, labour and work.

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