



Working in the Shadows: Women Domestic Workers' Struggle for Dignity

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ABSTRACT

Women domestic workers (WDW) are the back bone of urban cities in India. Their contribution in economic growth of a country is very significant but unfortunately neglected. They rendered their services devoid of any protection and social safety at their work places. As the citizen of democratic India, constitution has given them some rights which protect them to injustice and live in a dignified manner but due to lack of legal provisions they have suffered with many challenges and stigma in the society. Employer forcefully takes huge work and pays less. WDWs are the victim of the violation of human rights due to poor literacy rate and awareness about human rights laws which put them in less capable state to fight against this injustice. This paper discussing about the challenges of WDWs faced at their work places. Author's aim to find out the impetus behind the existing situation of WDWs and give appropriate suggestion to policy makers and concerning authority to take landmark decisions in the interest WDWs of India.

KEYWORDS: Human Rights, Decent Work, Women Domestic Workers (WDW), International Labor Organization (ILO)

INTRODUCTION

Human resources are an important pillar for the sustainable development of a nation. Without protection and safety of them no nation can grow longer. Due to the culture of metropolitan cities and modernization rural-urban places, demand of domestic workers are increasing day by day. In the fast pace life of corporate culture women domestic workers are contributing in a very significant manner. But despite of such great contribution they are not given respect and recognition they deserve in true meanings. Due to lack of education, lack of policy and legal awareness about their work they are not able to access their constitutional, legal and human rights to protect themselves.

As per census report 2011, the total number of domestic workers in India was registered 4.13 million; out of them 2.79 million were women which are 67.55% of total domestic workers in the nation. 90% domestic workers are informal and without contracts (ILO,2019). Women serve as domestic workers in of metropolitan cities belongs to rural areas or populous states of the country. Initially, the WDW works to help to contribute financial support to the bread earner of the family but with the respect of time they work as professional domestic workers. But due to illiteracy and lack of awareness about wages they are not able to deal with their employers, resultant got exploited by them. There are existing numbers of policies and laws which provide legal assistance to every domestic worker but they could not access single of them. This study aims to figure out the lacuna to the implementation of these policies by critically analyzing the existing status of women domestic workers in India.

The Four Pillars of Decent work- For any organization vision, it is needed to have specific aim and vision to develop clear insight to achieve aim of organization and deal with upcoming potential challenges. To deal with this all organizations required to build a theory on pillars. In the context of WDWs, ILO described about the four basic pillars of decent work which helps to employer and worker to create a fair working environment. These four pillars are listed below:



Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study to explore the issues of WDW (Women Domestic Workers) in metropolitan area which shines for their steady development.

Research Methodology:

In this study, Descriptive research design method used to focus on ground work as it is practice in daily life. Primary data and secondary data both were collect to present genuine results related to the research work. In this research work, Primary data collected from 30 respondents belongs to Ramgarh village, Panchkula district, Haryana. Government published data belonged to Lok sabha question answer session related to the research topic was use for secondary data collection. For relevant data collection structured interview schedule method used to collect data from respondents and under non-probability sampling method snow ball sampling method used to reach the potential respondents to make this work rich.

KEY ISSUES OF WDWs: The main issues behind the suffering of WDWs are presented below:



Women domestic workers are considered as unorganized workers, they face many difficulties which are against the concept of decent work and affect their holistic development. There are some key issues faced by WDWs in their routine work-

1. **Low Wages-** WDWs offered many services in daily household activities like cooking, cleaning, taking care of children and old age persons etc. This kind of work demand attention and punctuality to provide complete assistance to the employer. Their nature of work is very vital and wages are very low. Due to poor wages, irregular and late payments WDWs are not able to provide minimum livelihood to their dependents. All in all, due to low wages WDWs are not able to provide nutritive food and education to their children.

Table No. 1: Monthly Wages Earn by Respondents

S.No	Monthly Wages Slab (In rupees)	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1.	1000 – 2500	03	10
2.	2501 – 4000	04	13.33
3.	4001 – 5500	04	13.33
4.	5501 – 7000	09	30
5.	7001 – 8500	07	23.33
6.	8501 – 10000	02	6.67
7.	10001 – 11500	01	3.33
8.	Total	30	100.0

N-30

The above table shows the monthly wages of the respondents where 30 percentage of the respondents wages up to 5501 to 7000. On the contrary, 23.3 percentage of the respondents wages up to 7001 to 8500. Here, it was observed that 13.33 percent of the respondents held up to 4001 to 5500 rupees in a month. Following it, 13.33 percent of the respondents wages up to 2501 to 4000 rupees per month. Further, 10 percent of the respondents bagged 1000 to 2500 rupees monthly. Following it, 6.67 percent of the respondents wages up to 8501 to 10000 rupees per month. In the last 3.33 percent of the respondents wages up to 10001 to 11500 rupees monthly.

Therefore, the present table signifies that the majority of the respondents (30%) were being earned around 7000 rupees per month. Only 3.3% respondents were earned the wages up to 10001 to 11500 rupees in a month. In a nutshell, it can be seen that the income of the respondents is not adequate to serve the family needs.

- 2. Long working Hours-** Unlike organized sector workers, the work of WDWs do not have fix and regular timing. They generally work in the morning and evening but as the necessitate of employer they have to change in timings of their work or many times have to do other work of household which are not belongs to their verbal contract of work. The severe issue lie here that employer gets this extra work without any kind of payments and most of the time this work done by WDWs by feeling inherent force from employer. They do extra work in no payment because they also feel feared to lose their jobs. Uncertainty in their work is the prime reason of dissatisfaction resultant they could not create healthy environment in their family as well.

Thus, it was observed and found by the researcher that the respondents as domestic workers had to spend a lot of time at workplace in a day.

Table No.2: Number of Working Hours

Sr No	Number of Working Hours	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Up to 2 hours	03	10.0
2	3 to 4 hours	08	26.7
3	5 to 6 hours	07	23.3
4	7 to 8 hours	04	13.3
5	More than 8 hours	08	26.7
Total		30	100.0

N-30

The above mentioned table show the result that 26.7 percent of respondents stated that they used to work more than 8 hours at their workplace. On the same note, 26.7 percent of the respondents uttered that they were bound to work 3-4 hours on an average every day. Following it, 10 percent of the respondents had to invest up to 2 hours at workplace on an average every day. In addition, 23.3 percent of the respondents usually worked for 5-6 hours in a day at workplace. Moreover, 13.3 percent of the respondents usually spent 7-8 hours at workplace in a day.

- 3. No Job security-** The biggest key issue of WDWs is uncertainty in the job. It has seen employer makes pressure to do extra work, and not allow for weekly holyday, if they oppose the employer call they lose their job. This is happen because of the absence of contract which followed the formal details related to description of work, amount of wage and condition of holiday etc. Resultant, raising voice for their rights puts them in instable state in their occupation. Apart from this, there are no job securities provided by government or any responsible authority.

Table No.3: Action Taken by You against the Forced Overtime

Sr No	Action Taken by WDW	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Talk to Employer	14	46.7
2	Left Workplace	01	3.3
3	Nothing	15	50.0
Total		30	100.0

N-30

The above table highlights the attitude of respondents regarding the issues experienced at workplace. In this context, 46.7 percent of the total respondents stated that if they had any issue at workplace, they shared with their employers. The same percent of the respondents uttered that they shared the matter of overtime with their employers. On the contrary, 15 percent of the respondents

answered that they took no action if their employer compelled them to do overtime. In the end, only 3.3 percent of the respondents quitted their job due to such issues like workload, irritating behavior of the employers etc. Thus, majority of the respondents uttered that they took no action against their employers because they thought that this domestic work was their mean of livelihood and they did not want to lose it. In this connection, 46.7 percent of the respondents stated that they used to share with their employers regarding overtime and extra working hours because it seemed difficult for them to spare overtime due to family necessities. Some of the respondents uttered that they decided to quit their job due to such reasons.

- 4. Physical, mental and sexual Abuse-** In the era of 21st century, female house help are the victim of discrimination in the name of caste, status, and many of other things exist in society. Physical, mental and sexual harassment are the major issue for every WDWs. They have no instant security, safety and protection window to deal with it at the work places. Using power of status and money, the employer creates pressure and does physical, mental and sexual abuse which hit the WDWs adversely at all levels.

Table No.4: Exploitation at Workplace

S.N	Response	Number of Respondents	Total
1.	Mental Torture	03	10.0
2.	Overload of Work	03	10.0
3.	Can't Share	02	6.7
4.	1,2	09	30.0
5.	No Exploitation	13	43.3
6.	Total	30	100.0

N-30

The above mentioned table shows that 43.3 percent of the respondents experienced no exploitation at workplace. On the contrary, 30 of the total respondents stated that they had to experience mental torture and remain at workplace for long working hours. Following it, 10 percent of the respondents replied that they had to face mental torture at workplace. 10 percent of the respondents had to spend long hours at workplace without extra-payment. Thereupon, 6.7 percent of the total respondents stated no answer to this question of exploitation at workplace.

- 5. Lack of Social Protection** – Social protection provide security from poverty, vulnerability and social inclusion. It also helps to maintain dignity and self-respect to the WDWs but due to lack of social security, they treated like contemporary slaves¹. In general, there are many social protection schemes offered by government but no single policy is made which discuss thoroughly about the social issues of WDWs.

¹ Domestic workers welfare and social act, 2010

6. Stigma and Social Exclusion- Domestic work is vital work but people considered it as ‘dirty work’ which is linked with poor work (people not valued this work) and dirt handling etc. Because of this kind of poor mentality stigma develop in employers mind related to the WDWs. Society livings and they avoid to invite them in social and family function due to their work. Even, if they invite WDWs in their celebrations than they never invited them as guest. They always invite them to do work as domestic worker. At the end, stigma related to WDWs stopped employers to treat them as human.

Table No.5: Receiving an Invitation for Social Program

Particulars		Receiving an Invitation of Social Program		Total
		No	Yes	
Participation in the Social Programs	No	12	0	12
	Yes	0	18	18
Total		12	18	30

N-30

The above given table reflects whether the respondents used to receive any invitation for any social event or program or not. It shows their social acceptance with other diverse groups in their ambience.

Here, 60 percent of the respondents stated that they used to receive the invitations for social program from several diverse social groups or communities and institutes even. On the opposite of this, only 40 percent of the respondents affirmed that they did not receive any king of invitation for social program.

Thus, most of the migrated respondents did not get any invitation of social programs because they had no social interaction with other colony members. And one of the striking thing was observed by the researcher that social discrimination on caste lines was also prevalent in the women domestic workers’ colony. Local leadership was also influential there because it was apparent that locals used to get some invitation for social gatherings or events on the contrary migrated usually did not have any invitation. And it was because of the we-feeling among the locals.

7. No basic facilities – WDWs are not able to access basic facilities at work place freely. They are not allowed to use washroom at workplace by ignoring the fact they cleaned those washrooms for employer and employers’ family safe use. Even at most of house water, tea serves to domestic workers in separate utensils which not used for any other purpose or not used by anyone except them. Thus, these all facts indicate the discrimination with WDWs on the basis of caste, culture, social, regional and financial status.

Table No.6: Free & Easy Access to Basic Facility at Workplace

Sr No	Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Yes	07	23.3
2	No	23	76.7
Total		30	100.0

N-30

The given table highlights the respondents' views regarding the above-mentioned question related to accessibility to basic things usages like use toilets at workplace, accessibility to water points etc. In this context, 23.3 percent of the respondents stated that they had a free access to these facilities like water and toiled facilities at their workplace. On the other hand, 76.7 percent of the respondents clearly mentioned that they did not have a free accessibility to these facilities.

In a nutshell, it could have said that majority of respondents did not have a free access to even the basic facilities like using water and toilet utility. Respondents disclosed to the researcher during the data collection that some of the employers displayed such gestures that reflected that they had to bring their own water bottle and if they wanted to use the utensils for drinking water, they had to use the utensils which were kept separated by the employers. And these utensils were used by the employer and their family members.

And; it was happening because of the caste prejudices and religion based prohibitions. Thereupon, only 7 respondents answered that they had a free access to water and toilet facility at workplace. During data collection period, it was found through the personal discussion among the domestic workers that majority of the employers used to discriminate with them more or less.

VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are rights innate to all human beings without any discrimination of race, gender, religion or any other category. It also comprises the right of life and liberty, freedom of expression and opinion, right to work, worship and education etc. Right to fair compensation and equally pay, right to safe working condition and health, right to freedom from exploitation and abuse, right to social security and benefits, right to dignity and respect are the human rights which are generally violated at the workplace by employer and hiring agency in WDWs case. There are some human rights which are violated

- **Right to Equality-** In the article-15(2) of Indian Constitution defined that no one can get discriminated on grounds of religion, sex, caste and place but in practice a huge violation of this human right is being done by employer and hiring agencies of WDWS.²
- **Equal pay for equal work-** WDWs faces discrimination on the basis of gender which is the violation of human right and gender neutrality. In the supreme law of the land Indian Constitution, it is clearly mentioned that there is equal pay for equal work for both men and women.³ Despite of this, gender discrimination has seen in practice which is again against the human rights, equal remuneration act, 1976 and supreme law of the land.

² Article-15(2) Constitution of India (as on 1st May 2024) , cited on 17 October 2024, available on <https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/>

³ Article-39(d) Constitution of India (as on 1st May 2024) , cited on 17 October 2024, available on <https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/>

- **Violation of minimum wage act-** Women domestic workers does not get a fixed wages, no bonus policy, and there is no specific procedure of holiday from work. Instead of getting a respectful monetary value they get what their employer decides. Inflation rate increase year on year basic but they get poor amount of money as wage which is the violation of minimum wage act, 1948. WDWs are vulnerable section of the society, for whom government should take a remarkable decision to get a nice wage.
- **Right to safe working conditions and health-** Every worker deserve a decent work place where essential things is being provided by the employer but WDWs work forced to work in poor environment. In general, WDWs don't get appropriate environment and services for their self as a human being at their workplace. Henceforth, the careless behavior of employer towards WDWs living and working environment at their workplace is against the Health and Working Condition Code, 2020 and International Labour Organization.⁴
- **Right to social security and benefits-** Social security and other benefits are the primary demand for WDWs presently. In the time of social inclusion, no policy is secure the health and other rights of WDWs. This is unacceptable that there is no policy related to pregnant WDWs by which she can avail the financial benefits from employer. Despite of it if she is pregnant, she has to leave her job. In the time of pregnancy when she needs high nutritive value in meal, she has to face financial crisis which is against the human rights.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES TO PROTECT WDWs

Human safety and protection are the constitutional duty of any government in the state. To ensure this government takes initiatives as per the demands of the affected group and the necessity of the requirements to uplift the conditions of country people according to government policy. In the context of WDWs government of India has taken some significant initiatives which help to secure human rights and tries to provide a healthy and friendly working environment. There are some initiatives taken by the government-

- **Domestic Workers Welfare Bill, 2017-** On 07th April, 2017 introduced a bill by the name of the **Domestic Workers (regulation of work and social security) Bill, 2017**⁵ in the upper house of the parliament which aims to protect domestic workers legally. This bill is covered in eight chapters and 61 clauses and thoroughly discuss about the safety and rights of domestic worker.
- **National Policy for Domestic Workers, 2019-** This is the initiative of Ministry of Labour & Employment, which is in view of to create a National Policy on Domestic

⁴ National policy on safety, health and environment at work place, ministry of labour and employment, government of India, cited on 17 October 2024, available on <https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/SafetyHealthandEnvironmentatWorkPlace.pdf>

⁵ *The domestic workers (regulation of work and social security) bill, 2017* cited on 17 October 2024, available on <https://sansad.in/getFile/BillsTexts/RSBillTexts/Asintroduced/domestic-7417E.pdf?source=legislation#:~:text=India%20as%20follows:%E2%80%94,1.,employment%20to%20any%20other%20country.>

Workers. This policy aims the inclusion of domestic workers in the existing legislations, Protection of domestic workers from abuse and exploitation; establish a grievance redressal system for domestic workers, access to social security, right to minimum wage and many initiatives in the welfare of WDWS⁶.

Conclusion & Recommendations

All in all, the WDWs are the backbone of metropolitan cities which shines for their steady development factor and this factor create more earning opportunities for all background people. So, like everyone WDWs migrated in the metropolitan areas to earn and to support bread earner of the family. Here, not only WDWs found the opportunity of work and earn but also the middle class and elite people depend on the services of WDWs which they provide to employer and employers family in return of money. Without the help of WDWs no urban city can sustain so long. WDWs problem and challenges are mushrooming day by day. To deal with it, it is essential for policy makers to create an umbrella policy by which all kind of issues of WDWs can be resolve at the single platform in effective manner. It is also need to introduce a social security and other benefits to WDWs through a effective social security scheme which specially targeted specifically population of WDWs. With this effective execution of all schemes and policies at ground level is also required.

Globally, it is needed to ratify ILO domestic workers convention, 2011(No.189) on domestic workers, which recognize the significant contribution of domestic workers to the global economy⁷. Most of the WDWs are not literate and failed to access their rights as a worker due to less awareness which becomes the main reason of the violation of their human rights at their workplace. Apart from government, NGOs, social welfare groups, domestic and labour worker activists can help them to provide assistance regarding the violation of human rights. There can be many methods by which employer and WDWs can sensitize about the protection of human rights. Indian policy makers should do a comparative study in the globe's top countries where

WDWs are in good social and economic condition. Apart from this WDWs as worker and their employer should sensitize for the rights, duty, functions and wages of WDWs by utilizing different methods of professional social work like: awareness campaign, educational lectures, nukkad-natak, role play, group discussions and using documentary related to the worker and employers life challenges which sensitize both WDWs and employers etc .

⁶ National policy for domestic workers, cited on 17 October 2024, available on

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1564261> ⁷ Domestic Workers Convention, 2011(No.189)

https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C189 cited on 15-

Oct, 2024