

OPPRESSED BREAD WINNERS A PROFILE OF FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS OF AMRITSAR

Anjali Mehra, Seozy Bhatia*, Paramjit Dhindsa**

Equitable and inclusive development requires that all the members of the society gain from the benefits of growth. But it is observed that for India, development has been more of mechanical process characterized by exclusion not only in terms of control of assets and income generating opportunities but also exclusion in terms of geographical location, caste, community and gender.

The present study analysis

A survey was conducted on 100 married female domestic workers in the city of Amritsar, Punjab selected through convenience random sampling.

The results found that the combination of push and pull factors have contributed to women entering domestic work. Most of them have adopted this profession to provide their households a source of income as their husbands are either idle or are earning very less. Thus, it can be concluded that if development has to be truly meaningful for this oppressed category of illiterate and often exploited workers there is urgent need to develop a dedicated system of institutions, legal framework mechanisms and practices aimed at protecting them from exploitation not only at the workplace but also supporting them at their homes so that they can live a life of dignity.

Keywords : Gender, Inclusive Development

INTRODUCTION

Equitable and inclusive development requires that all the members of the society gain from the benefits of growth (Ghosh, 2013). But it is observed that for India, development has been more of mechanical process characterized by exclusion not only in terms of control of assets and income generating opportunities but also exclusion in terms of geographical location, caste, community and gender. The post liberalization scenario has seen the share of agriculture and industrial sector in employment falling while that of service sector rising over the period. One component of service sector comprises of work that entails higher levels of education and skill formation while at the other extreme are the uneducated and unskilled domestic workers who are mostly disadvantaged poor, belonging to lower classes and castes.

Domestic workers are the ones who perform variety of household tasks such as cleaning, washing, cooking and other chores on daily basis as paid service and constitute bulk of workforce in the unorganized sector in India. They have become an important element in the social life of the community, contributing to its general health and welfare. The wide varieties of tasks performed in the households by this class of workers are certainly vital to the conduct and well-being of family as they share the burden of stress by performing the major daily tasks of the household and make the life of civilians more comfortable. Despite the growing importance of this workforce, they are denigrated, undervalued and denied the human rights which they are actually entitled to. They are perceived as something lower than the standard of work of the society by the employers, family members and by themselves also.

* Assistant Professor, School of Social Sciences, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Email: anjalieco@gmail.com, Ph: 91-9501023803 and seozy_bhatia_2007@yahoo.co.in Ph: 91-8054083685 respectively

**Professor, Punjab School of Economics, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar

In a recent report by UNESCO titled “Social Inclusion of Internal Migrants in India” (2013), it has been estimated that domestic workers sector has grown by 222 percent since 1999-2000 and is the largest sector of female employment in urban India. Citing the information given by The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, the Report has estimated that out of four million domestic workers, three million were women. These women workers who are forced to migrate to urban areas from their rural environment mainly due to marriage, are most vulnerable as they are excluded from the economic, cultural, social and the political life of the society and are often treated as second class citizens not only by the community but also by their families.

Violence against women which is prevalent not only in India, but in every country in the world is one of the leading causes of morbidity for women. One of the most persuasive forms of violence against women is Domestic Violence. Domestic violence refers to violence against women especially in matrimonial cases. It is any act of physical, sexual or psychological abuse or threat of such abuse inflicted against women by a person intimately connected to her through marriage, family relation or acquaintanceship is universal and has its roots in socio-cultural set up of society. The perpetrators of domestic violence have often been found to be males and the victims their partners. Internationally, one in three women has been beaten, abused in their lifetime by her husband (*Heise, 1999*).

Inclen (2000) found domestic violence as a problem that cuts across age, education, social class and religion in India. The same study is of the view that 40 percent women had experienced atleast one form of physical violence in their married life. Further, Leonard (1992); Rao (1997) came out with the findings that lifestyle of men, smoking, alcoholism and drugs promote men to commit domestic violence. Further, a G20 survey ranked India as the worst place to be women (Baldwin, 2012). Female feticide, domestic violence, sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence constitute the reality of most women and girls lives in India.

Objective of the Study

Several surveys have been conducted by the researchers and social scientists to analyze and improve the conditions of these domestic workers till now. Many writers have discussed about the status of domestic servants in the society of India. While the discussion on economic aspects has been generally conducted, surprisingly very few studies have tried to do an intersecting analysis and explore the ground reality of the daily lives of domestic female workers, which highlight their need to move out of their homes as well as try to take into account their maltreatment in the hands of their family members especially their spouses. The present study is an attempt in this direction. Specifically the objectives of the study are :

- To study the socio-economic profile of domestic female workers
- To study the level of oppression suffered by these domestic workers.
- To find out the level of awareness of women rights among female domestic workers

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted in the months of July to September, 2013 to study lives of 100 married female domestic workers in the city of Amritsar, Punjab selected through convenience random sampling. A structured questionnaire was prepared and data was collected through interview method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following tables depict the demographic profile, view their status of living, sketch their

income and occupation profile as well as attempt to contour and analyze the oppression suffered by these women at the hands of their family members.

Table 1- Demographic Profile of Respondents

| Age (in years) | Number of respondents | Percentage of respondents |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 15-25 | 32 | 32 |
| 25-35 | 42 | 42 |
| 35 and above | 26 | 26 |
| Religion | | |
| Hindu | 20 | 20 |
| Sikh | 68 | 68 |
| Others | 12 | 12 |
| Education | | |
| Illiterate | 75 | 75 |
| Below Primary | 25 | 25 |
| Primary and above | 0 | 0 |
| Reasons for Discontinuing Education | | |
| Poor economic background | 70 | 70 |
| Marriage | 5 | 5 |
| Family pressure | 5 | 5 |
| Not interested | 20 | 20 |
| Marital Status | | |
| Married | 87 | 87 |
| Widow | 10 | 10 |
| Divorcee | 03 | 03 |
| Age at the time of Marriage (years) | | |
| Less than 18 | 77 | 77 |
| 18-25 | 23 | 23 |
| 25 and above | 0 | 0 |
| Age of Husbands at the time of marriage (years) | | |
| Less than 18 | 54 | 54 |
| 18-25 | 44 | 44 |
| 25 and above | 02 | 02 |
| Number of children | | |
| 1-2 | 15 | 15 |
| 2-4 | 53 | 53 |
| 4 and above | 32 | 32 |
| Total | 100 | 100 |

Table 1 depicts about the Demographic profile of respondents. Majority of them belonged to age group of 25-35 years (42 percent) and 26 percent were above 35 years of age indicating that it was the young women who ventured out of their homes to work while the elderly looked after their children. Though 68 percent of women said that they follow *sikh* religion but they all belonged to lower castes i.e. *Majhbi* sikhs and 12 percent were *dalits* who had converted to Christianity. As far as their educational status is concerned, 75 percent of them were illiterate and had never gone to school, while the rest 25 percent had just studied up to one or two classes or at the maximum completed their primary education.

Table 2 - Standard of Living of Respondents

| | Number of respondents | Percentage of respondents |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Type of Family | | |
| Joint | 20 | 20 |
| Nuclear | 80 | 80 |
| Ownership of House | | |
| Rented | 44 | 44 |
| Self owned | 56 | 56 |
| Condition of Houses | | |
| Kuccha | 35 | 35 |
| Pucca | 05 | 05 |
| Semi pucca | 60 | 60 |
| Electricity connection | | |
| Yes | 100 | 100 |
| No | 0 | 0 |
| Water Connection | | |
| Yes | 80 | 80 |
| No | 20 | 20 |
| Bathroom facility | | |
| Yes | 60 | 60 |
| No | 40 | 40 |
| Toilet Facility | | |
| Yes | 15 | 15 |
| No | 85 | 85 |
| Bank account | | |
| Yes | 82 | 82 |
| No | 18 | 18 |
| Personal Mobile | | |
| Yes | 20 | 20 |
| No | 80 | 80 |
| BPL card | | |
| Yes | 10 | 10 |
| No | 90 | 90 |
| Health Insurance card | | |
| Yes | 05 | 05 |
| No | 95 | 95 |
| Total | 100 | 100 |

None of them had gone for secondary education as 70 percent of them cited poverty as reason for discontinuation, while 10 percent were forced due to family pressures to discontinue their studies

for marriage, indicating that it is the boys and men who get precedence over girls and women in terms of resources on education and training while education of females is still not a priority for their families. Regarding their marital status it was found that 87 percent of them were married and living with their spouses while another 10 percent were widows and 3 percent were divorcees. It was observed that 77 percent of them married when their age was less than 18 years of age, while 23 percent of them were in the age group of 18-25 years at the time of their marriage. Most of them said that their consent was not taken for marriage; in fact many of them were forcibly married to men much older than them. As regards to their spouses, it was found that 54 percent of them were below 18 years of age and 44 percent were between the age group of 18 to 25 years at the time of marriage. So this clearly indicates lack of awareness about the laws regarding the age limit at the time of marriage. When asked about number of children, 32 percent of them had more than four children while another 53 percent had two to four children. Desire to have a male child and in many cases even if the first born was male then the desire of elders to have pair of male children as well as lack of awareness about family planning measures has led to these women having many children.

Table 2 details about the standard of living of women surveyed. 20 percent of the respondents reported that they lived in joint families while 80 percent said that they were living in nuclear families but most of them were having a separate kitchen in the room they resided but the house belonged to their father in law as there was only division of cooking facility. As regards the ownership of house is concerned, 56 percent of them live in self-owned houses while 44 percent lives in rented houses.

The plight of these workers is evident from the kind of accommodation they dwell in. While 35 percent lived in *kuchha* houses, 60 percent lived in *semi-kuchha* that is the house did not have a concrete terrace and the flooring was also made of mud, making these houses unsafe. Aggravating the situation was the fact that 95 percent of these houses had only one to two rooms in which the entire family lived, cooked and did their daily chores making it very unhygienic. Of the total, 85 percent reported that while for bathing they used a corner of the house; open field defecation was their normal practice. While 80 percent said that for water they either had municipal connection or had dug their own bore well, 20 percent reported that they got water from public religious place or from neighbors. One heartening fact was that hundred percent of the houses were electrified. It was noticed that though 82 percent of them have admitted to having bank accounts, they were either in their husbands name and there was no money in their accounts. As regards to mobiles while all of them accepted that their husbands or sons had possession of mobiles only 20 percent revealed that they had personal mobiles.

As regards to facilities provided by the government it was found that only meager 10 percent had access to BPL card facility which enables poor people to enjoy the benefits of resources provided by government at subsidized rates. The 90 percent did not have an access to this card revealed that the *sarpanch* of the village, or the councilor of their locality had issued this card only to their supporters and they were denied of this benefit. Further, only 5 percent were in possession of Health Insurance card which entails them of free medicines and other facilities in case they are admitted to government hospitals to the tune of thirty thousand rupees. Many of them revealed that they had paid to the tune of two hundred to four hundred rupees to get this card made to some agent who gave them fabricated cards and thus they were denied its benefit also.

Table 3 - Income and Occupation Detail of Respondents

| Regularity of employment of respondent's spouse | Number of respondents | Percentage of respondents |
|--|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Regular employees | 15 | 15 |
| Casual workers | 70 | 70 |
| Unemployed | 15 | 15 |
| Employment profile of respondents | | |
| Regular | 100 | 100 |
| Casual | 0 | 0 |
| Monthly Income of respondents (Rs.) | | |
| 1000-3000 | 70 | 70 |
| 3000-5000 | 25 | 25 |
| 5000 and above | 05 | 05 |
| Period of joining work by respondents | | |
| Before Marriage | 60 | 60 |
| After marriage | 40 | 40 |
| Working hours per day | | |
| 1-5 | 15 | 15 |
| 5 and above | 85 | 85 |
| Total Family Income (Rs) | | |
| 2000-5000 | 42 | 42 |
| 5000-8000 | 50 | 50 |
| 8000 and above | 08 | 08 |
| Monthly family expenditure (Rs.) | | |
| Below 5000 | 45 | 45 |
| 5000-7000 | 20 | 20 |
| 7000 and above | 35 | 35 |
| Monthly family saving of respondents (Rs.) | | |
| Nothing | 08 | 08 |
| Below 1000 | 65 | 65 |
| 1000-2000 | 27 | 27 |
| 2000 and above | 0 | 0 |
| Source of savings | | |
| Gold | 05 | 05 |
| Bank/ post offices | 55 | 55 |
| Others | 40 | 40 |
| Source of Funding during Emergency | | |
| Employers | 72 | 72 |
| Relatives | 22 | 22 |
| Unorganized money lenders | 06 | 06 |
| Organized sources | 0 | 0 |

Table 3 depicts about the Income and Occupation profile of respondents. It was observed that while all the women were regularly working as domestic maids doing daily chores like washing, cleaning of house, some of them cooking meals and looking after the children of employees. They were earning between Rs 1000 to Rs 3000 and only 5 percent earned above Rs 5000 monthly. 85 percent of them worked for more than five hours a day that is from 9 am to 3 pm. It was observed that only 15 percent of their husbands had regular employment and husbands of 10 percent female domestic workers worked on daily basis as carpenters, laborers, masons, painters etc earning between Rs 4000 to Rs 6000. 15 percent of women reported that their husbands were unemployed or sitting idle. Further, it was observed that as far as their children earning is concerned, majority of male children do not study and even do not work. But their daughters study in government schools and are working in the evening shift and contributing to income of family. The total family income varied between Rs 2000 to Rs 10,000. As regards family expenditure, about 35 percent of them have spent more than Rs 7000 monthly as expenditure while 45 percent of them have expenditure less than Rs 5000. Majority of these women revealed that it was their responsibility to take care of basic necessities and expenses incurred on children in the form of education, health, and transportation etc with their spouses barely contributing to such expenses. As regards their savings are concerned, 8 percent of them responded that they were barely able to meet their expenses and saved nothing. 65 percent admitted savings below Rs 1000 and 27 percent had savings between Rs 1000 to Rs 2000. Majority of savings (70 percent) were done in the forms of kitties and committees, while only 25 percent saved in banks/ post offices. Only 5 percent saved in the form of gold and that too was for the future marriage of their daughters.

Table 4 - Oppressed Bread Winners: Report of Ill Treatment of Respondents at the Hands of Husband/Family Members

| Addiction of Husband | Excessive | Rarely |
|--|-----------|--------|
| Drinking | | |
| Yes | 90 | 10 |
| No | 0 | 0 |
| Drugs | | |
| Yes | 73 | 0 |
| No | 27 | 0 |
| Abusive habits of spouse | | |
| Verbal | 90 | 10 |
| Physical | 70 | 30 |
| In case of discord whom do they approach | | |
| No approach | 70 | 70 |
| Family members | 28 | 28 |
| Police | 02 | 02 |
| Social Organizations | 0 | 0 |

Table 4 tries to portray the marital problems of female workers. It can be observed that almost all respondents complaint about the excessive drinking habits of their husbands. They were of the view that earlier availability of liquor especially country made was restricted to few shops but as a result of change in the Liquor policy, several outlets have been opened in every nook and corner of the villages as a result of which alcohol is easily available resulting in excessive drinking. The

problem of severe drug abuse is reflected in the assertion by these workers that 73 percent of their husbands consumed drugs in excessive amounts resulting in the fact that they do not contribute anything to the family. In fact many of them resort to theft and other illegal activities, brunt of which these hapless women have to bear. Another repercussion of these abusive habits is the ill treatment of these domestic workers at the hands of their husbands. While 90 percent disclosed that they were verbally abused, 70 percent of them have admitted physical abuse by their husbands. This abuse sometimes becomes so severe that they are admitted to hospitals or they think of committing suicides. In case of discord, 70 percent do not approach to anybody while 28 percent reported it to their own family members while only 2 percent reported to police as they are disillusioned with institutional system and preferred culture of silence. Further, the sense of shame associated with being abused is also one factor which leads them to suffer.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

From the above study it is clear that combination of push and pull factors have contributed to women entering domestic work. Most of them have adopted this profession to provide their households a source of income as their husbands are either idle or are earning very less. Though they have emerged as the chief bread earner in the family, but the respect they should command is lacking. It has been observed that generally their day starts at four am and ends at twelve midnight after they finish their household chores, but they do not get any help from their family members rather are ill treated due to following reasons:

- Low level of literacy among these strata of population
- There is inherent belief in the inherent superiority of males
- Daily conflicts, family related problems, disagreements among men and women on any decisions, choice preferences, poverty, unjust traditional dowry system and most importantly alcoholic addiction of men.
- Alcohol utilization is another triggering factor for the violence, as it inhibits judgmental capabilities, decreases the abilities to understand social norms and roles. Excessive alcohol and other drugs consumption have also been noted as a factor in provoking aggressive and violent male behavior towards women and children. Even when the wife points out the hazards of alcohol to her partner, it often results in violence.
- Lack of awareness about the role that is played by the civil society, non-governmental organizations as well as disillusionment with government institutions
- These incidences of violence are spoiling not only the present but also the future generations as children who witness domestic violence. They may develop serious emotional, behavioral, developmental and academic problems. As they develop, children and teens who grow up with domestic violence in the household are more likely to use violence to enhance their reputation and self esteem and are likely to become abusers in later life
So it becomes imperative that following steps should be taken:
- Media can play an important role and can be harnessed as a powerful tool for bringing a change.
- Education and awareness among young people can be adopted as a preventive strategy
- Laws prohibiting violence against women are inadequate or insufficient or poorly enforced but change can be possible at the community level

- Ensuring women's empowerment through opening of bank accounts as well as providing skills through evening schools teaching vocational courses.
- Need for greater cooperation between all the stakeholders to tackle violence against women is essential
- Community mobilization and awareness raising programmes can also play an important role
- Essential curriculum should be revised to provide technical and entrepreneurial Role of Nongovernmental organizations is also important in curbing the domestic violence. These NGO's need to spread awareness amongst people regarding the legal rights they have in hand for fighting against the atrocities they are subjected to.
- Enactment of an Act on the lines of Janashree Yojana under Maharashtra domestic workers welfare Board Act 2008 under which there is accident and death coverage and scholarships for children Similar schemes should be launched in Punjab also.
- Rethink on Punjab Excise policy in 2007 which resulted in switch over from auction system to licensing system for the distribution of liquor. This led to opening of more liquor vending shops providing local made alcohol at cheap rates resulting in increase in consumption of alcohol.

Thus, it can be concluded that if development has to be truly meaningful for this oppressed category of illiterate and often exploited workers there is urgent need to develop a dedicated system of institutions, legal framework mechanisms and practices aimed at protecting them from exploitation not only at the workplace but also supporting them at their homes so that they can live a life of dignity.

References

- Baldwin. 2012. Wife beating in Rural India: A Husband's Right? Evidence from Survey Data. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 33(15): 855-862.
- Ghosh. 2013. Social Development: Some Conceptual Considerations. *India Social Development Report*, 2012
- Heise, L. 1999. Ending Violence against Women Population Reports, Series L, No. 11. Baltimore, John Hopkins University School of Public Health, Population Information Program, December
- International Clinical Epidemiologists Network (INCLIN). 2000. Domestic Violence in India 3: A Summary Report of a Multi-Site Household Survey. Washington, DC: International Centre for Development and Population Activities.
- Leonard, K.E. and H.T. Blane. 1992. Alcohol and Marital Aggression in a National Sample of Young men. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 7(1): 19-30.
- Rao. 1997. An Empirical Classification for Motivations for Domestic Violence. *Violence against Women*, 3(4): 401-23.
- UNESCO: Social Inclusion of Internal Migrants in India: Internal Migration in India Initiative, June 2013