



Issues and Challenges of Female Domestic Workers: An Analysis

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Abstract

Female domestic workers are a neglected group among the unorganized workforce in Mizoram. For decades they have been exploited and only in recent years NGOs are taking up the cause of women domestic workers. The trend of keeping females as a domestic worker has increased day by day. This could be because of lack of education, unemployment and lack of other vocational skills. This study highlights the “issues and challenges of domestic workers and focus on the ingrained working and living conditions of domestic workers”. The study intends to bring greater attention to the situation of domestic workers in Mizoram and to facilitate the development of strategies and practical measures for promoting their rights and employment and working and living conditions in Mizoram. However, domestic work has remained unorganized, unrecognized and unrewarding and is denied of minimum wages, healthy work period, safe working conditions and other benefits in the absence of trade unions and state intervention and moreover, women domestic workers are subjected to series of injustices, deprivations and indignities in modern society due to the absence of meaningful legal safeguards, welfare measures and other provisions for the empowerment of women.

Keywords: *Working Conditions, Living Conditions, Domestic Workers.*

Background

The significant increasing demand on domestic workers is of growing concern today since many women are engaged outside the homes for work inclusive of paid and unpaid Labor (IN Ramirez, 2003). Historically, it is evidence that women in Mizoram practice jhum cultivation and mainly with a specific nature of work like *hlothlawlh*, cooking and preparation for lunch. However, with the pace of time the practices have now been changed where women work in government settings or non-governmental settings, private and public

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enterprises where the work is done outside the homes. Domestic workers work directly under the authority of the householder; the work is done by following the straight instructions of the employer who shall not originate any economic gain from the activity done by the worker. The strong preference for nuclear families has resulted in a demand for domestic workers in India and eventually Mizoram as well. The women domestic workers are neither not adequately educated nor organized through meaningful unionization. The issues and challenges of women domestic workers in India are examined in this article which is based on qualitative research methodology

Concept of Women Domestic Workers

Domestic work is one of the oldest and most significant informal occupations for millions of women around the world. Women seemed to have limited options and enter the domain of domestic work in the absence of education, economic resources and other opportunities. The term 'domestic service' is practically difficult to define since the duties of domestic workers were not well defined. However, domestic service is now accepted as an important category of livelihood across the globe and remains a highly personalized and informal service delivered in the homes of employers. In domestic service, work cannot be subjected to any comparative tests, since it has the character almost unique in wage paid industry. The service is being carried on for use, not for profit, and the settlement of wages remains an individual bargain between employer and employee (Caplow, 1954).

The women's domestic labour debate was particularly prominent in the western academia amongst feminists in the 1960s and 1970s. The implications of domestic labour on women's emancipation as well as transformation of gender roles, however, have been differently read by different schools of feminism. Domestic worker is a person who is engaged on a part time or full time basis in domestic service. The domestic worker receives remuneration periodically in cash or kind for a fixed period from the employer (Chandramouli, K).

The *Domestic Workers Convention* (C189) adopted by the ILO at the 100th International Labor Conference on 16th August, 2011 stressed the importance of addressing the rights of workers in the domestic sector and countries to ensure minimum wage protection for domestic workers. It also recommends regulations for occupational health and safety and the social security of workers in the sector. The legal rights and need for regulations and importance of women domestic workers have been largely ignored by the existing labor and employment services. Therefore, there is a need to understand the challenges faced and coping strategies adopted by women domestic workers in Mizoram as women's rights and human rights are viewed as distinct and women's rights are violated in a variety of ways. Gender is therefore a primary or related factor because gender related abuse has been most neglected which offers the greatest challenge to the fields of human rights today and therefore research is needed to undertake the understanding of working and living conditions of women domestic workers (Charlotte, B.)

Magnitude of Domestic Workers

Of the world's 6.1 billion population in 2000, women accounted for about 83 per cent of total domestic work in 2010 as compared to men (ILO, 2013) and there are at least 67 million domestic workers worldwide where 80% were all women. So, it remains highly a feminised sector (www.ilo.org). About 1.5 million Asian women work as migrant domestic workers in other countries, however, in the Philippines, there are estimated to be over 600,000 local domestic workers. According to Indian National Sample Survey (NSS) 2001 data, there were 2.0 million female workers and 0.3 million male workers as compared to 1.2 million female and 0.3 male workers in 1983, resulting in a substantial issue in the number of female workers (Mehrotra, 2008). In India, two draft bills, put forward by the National Commission for Women and the National Campaign Committee of Unorganized Sector Workers, to protect domestic workers have been in circulation since 2008, but neither has been passed.

However, the ILO (2004 – 2005) report has also documented that in India, there are 4.2 million (approx) of domestic workers comprising of the 3lakh domestic workers in North East States. The north east state has a large number of women and young girls enrolled in domestic work yet unrecognized and a decent work status denied to them. They are often named as maids, servants, kitchen girls and Aiyas while in Mizoram we call them 'awmpui'. In Mizoram, an organization named "Jeriko Khualbuk" has started realizing the need for protection of domestic worker's rights and freedom while working with commercial sex workers. The initiation of the Project "Formation of Domestic Workers union Structures" in 2004 was implemented in 12 cities in North East (Guwahati, Shillong, Tura, Aizawl, Agartala, Tezpur, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Tinsukia, Sarupather, Kohima and Imphal) covering six states namely: Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur (www.cdismhc.org).

Therefore, it is high time to ratify ILO C 189; 'Decent work for Domestic Workers' so that their work is recognized, they are paid a decent wage and are treated as workers with respect.

Issues and Challenges

Domestic work has been articulated as servants (working in other's home) and has a long history in India with both men and women. However, 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' (John, K., 2012). Most domestic workers are from the marginalized sections of society and a large number of them are migrants (Burmese, Chakmas, Hmar, Tripuri and tribal's from villages to cities or within territory itself) and the workers range from full-time to part-time workers, skilled and unskilled workers. The vast majority are from the poorer sections of the society (ILO, 2007). Women domestic workers are more vulnerable to human rights abuses since they work in gender-segregated and unregulated sectors of the economy, entertainment and sex industry, unprotected by labour legislation or policy and they are exposed to forced labour, precarious

working conditions, poorly paid job, discrimination and sexual exploitation and suffer poor health condition (Reddy 1986, Connell 1994, United Nations 1994, Hugo 2002, IOM 2003, Reshmi 2003, United Nations 2004, Rodriguez 2005).

Women domestic workers often engage in unskilled work and most poorly paid jobs, that have been deserted by national women. Because of the unregulated nature of domestic work, they have worked long hours, sometimes more than 15 hours a day (INSTRAW and IOM 2000) and forced to do extra work. In addition to abuse and discrimination arising from their immigration status, national origin and their lower status jobs, domestic workers are more frequently victims of violence, including sexual assault at the work place. The abuse to women domestic workers is less visible due to its hidden characteristics and they were highly dependent on the employer. Almost all the time, women domestic workers are low educated, less knowledge about the situation of the destination and unaware of their rights and obligations (Reshmi, 2003). Women domestic workers face numerous problems such as low wages, extra work, long working hours, lack of holidays, harassment at workplace, sexual exploitation, physical torture, ill treatment, lack of welfare facilities, lack of rest and freedom, absence of social security measures, development of fatigue, and low level of education. Moreover, they comprise a significant part of the global economy in informal employment and therefore they are the most vulnerable groups among informal workers. Domestic workers worked for private households, often without clear terms of employment, and are excluded from the scope of Labor legislation (ILO, 2016).

Women domestic workers face a number of risks that are common in domestic work service. Women in particular are marked by a series of changes in physical, psychological, social and economic issues. However, studies assessing the relationship between insufficient or inadequate food and accommodation, and humiliating or degrading treatment including physical and verbal abuse, inhumane or degrading treatment, and sexual harassment of domestic workers are lacking. The complexity of the women domestic workers and the accompanying changes in physical and social characteristics is usually emphasized, but it is not very well understood by the community at large. A poor understanding of the rights of women domestic worker's issues is the main cause for the absence of focus on services, information and research on unique features of International Labor Organization (ILO). In recent years, the trends of globalization and liberalization, the rapid spread of communication and information technology, and shifting social and moral norms may be said to have eroded the traditional bases and defining points for concern of others in Mizo society. However, empirical study and research based intervention is absent in the state. These require immediate attention and appropriate interventions. Therefore, the study is focusing on the exploration of the working and living conditions of women domestic workers by eliciting information on the issues and challenges faced by them.

Working Conditions

While intervening, the domestic workers were found denied minimum wages, healthy work - period, safe working conditions and other benefits. The wage levels of domestic workers are much less than their male counterparts. The employers do not

provide extra wages for more workload. They also carry out other tasks which are not linked with their regular duties. Domestic workers are paid below the minimum wages for both skilled and unskilled work and above that they are highly exploited, denied from just wages and work in inhumane conditions. Moreover, due to employment opportunities, domestic workers usually migrate from rural and tribal areas to urban areas. They experience a sense of loneliness because of the solitary nature of the work (Chandramouli, K)

The employers normally scold them in times of any delay or discrepancy in the work. They are not allowed to cultivate good human relations with the neighbors. They feel reluctant to report sexual harassment at workplace. Moreover, they are forced to remain silent due to power dynamics and fear of discrimination or dismissal (Gupta and Hajra, 2007). The relationship between employers and domestic workers is very subjective and depends on the individuals involved. There is a marginal increase in the number of women domestic workers in India (Rustagi, 2009). Sometimes the employer-employee relationship is a complex one and is viewed as one of domination, dependency and inequality (Ray and Qayum, 2009).

The women domestic workers have less voice in confronting the employer and often continue accepting whatever the employers pay them and are under constant fear that asking for a raise may lead to termination from work (Irudaya, 2010). The employers also provide them stale food or leftover food which is not good for their health and nutrition. The employers also refuse to give them paid leave even though they work hard beyond their capacity.

The double burden of working at their own homes on the one hand and the demands of the workplace on the other take a heavy toll on their lives. The workers suffered from sleeplessness, fear (often leading to more absenteeism and hence more stress and fear), severe headaches, and mental stress due to the financial consequences of frequent absences. Moreover, the continuous demand for perfection in their tasks, often with the employer watching closely while domestic workers go about their work, was by itself extremely stressful (Dithhi,B., Meghna,S. & Mohan,M.,2016).

According to Smith (2011), domestic workers are employed in private homes rather than firms or enterprises. This tends to make them invisible as formal workers and isolated from others in the sector. They are dependent on the good or bad will of their employer. Growing evidence shows that domestic workers are exposed to a range of unhealthy and hazardous working conditions despite the concept of the home as “safe haven”.

Living Conditions

To understand the living conditions of the domestic worker the ILO, 2016 has documented the evidence that many domestic workers fall under ‘live-in’ domestics. Their accommodations are not usually as comfortable as those reserved for the family

members. In some cases, they sleep in the kitchen or small rooms, sometimes located in the basement or attic. Domestic workers may live in their own home, though more often they are "live-in" domestics. The majority of domestic workers in China, Mexico, India, and other populous developing countries, are people from the rural areas who are employed by urban families (ILO, 2016).

Live-In domestic workers are the most prevalent workers in the state as most workers are migrants. Live-in domestic workers experience greater isolation, less privacy and more limited mobility, work longer hours and receive a larger share of payments in kind (such as board). The living conditions are frequently sub-standard. They are also more vulnerable to physical/sexual abuse by employers. Migrant domestic workers often live in the employers' home, facing not only the challenges of live-in domestics but also abuses within the recruitment system and from police and immigration authorities, including advance commission fees, withheld wages and passports, and verbal, physical, or sexual harassment. To protect migrant domestic workers, laws and regulations are needed at the international level and in both sending and receiving countries (Smith, 2011).

Poor Bargaining Power

There are very few advocates for the rights of domestic workers. They also have limited employment opportunities (Raghuram, 2001). The family history of the women domestic workers can also be traced from their employability point of view. The wages were not based on a 'need-based formula'. They do not have an organized performance of social networks and find it difficult in challenging the authority of the employer (Kaur, 2006). Numerous cases evolve nowadays where workers are treated very well but it is entirely at the discretion of the employers (Mehrotra, 2008:21). There is the fastest growth rate of migration in India which has resulted in the increase of women domestic workers (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009).

Social Insecurity

The women domestic workers do not receive adequate wages and live under difficult circumstances and they are not able to save money for their old age. Moreover, they are not entitled to any old-age pensions, gratuity or bonus. Above all, they have no medical insurance and all expenses of illness, hospitalization of self and family are borne by the worker. The caste and social stratification have induced the probability of individuals to enter domestic work. The domestic workers have very limited access to larger social networks (Neetha, 2004). So, there is a need to sustain and support organizations for domestic workers to improve their bargaining power. Therefore, organizing domestic workers is fundamental to finding solutions to the various problems faced by domestic workers (Kantor, Unni and Rani, 2006).

Push and Pull Factors

There are certain factors which drive women domestic workers to domestic work. Firstly, poverty is the main reason why many women and children engage in domestic

work. In almost all cases, these domestic workers are the product of internal migration in search of employment, due to family problems including rural and male unemployment and disputes at home. Also, ill treatment and loss of parents have resulted in their leaving the house to work as domestics. It is also usual to find domestic workers who are single parents, widowed or separated from their husbands or those with alcoholic husbands who are compelled to work for the survival of their children. Further, natural calamities and conflict situations such as insurgency are also factors forcing them to migrate because of displacement and loss of livelihood and the lack of rehabilitation programmes. However, their debts due to falling crops also push them to domestic work. On the other hand the demand of cheap labor in the growing market economies has caused many women and children to seek employment in the cities and urban areas (CWA Newsletter, 2004).

In addition, the lack of access to education, especially among young girls, and false image of security and a stable environment at the employer's home are factors that entice them to domestic work. Children from rural areas coming from poor families are sent to live with better off relatives in urban areas with promise that they will be treated by relatives as their own children; some are sent together with other household goods for purposes of child marriage; most have ran away from home and ended up as domestics in urban areas; and they are recruited from their villages by middle men and women (CWA News Letter, 2004).

The practice of child debt bondage to domestic labor in India is also a cause for migration of the child to live and work in the employer's home usually in urban areas to pay the debts of the child's family. The trend has highlighted a significant number of children are believed to be in bondage domestic work. This is a common practice in India although no studies are available to determine the number of children in bondage of domestic work. The effect of enforcement of child labor law may have established a pattern of driving bonded child laborers' from factories into households and other home-based production units that are less likely to be visible to regulation (Stafford, 2007).

On the contrary, many factors have led women to practice domestic work. Women from poor households and disadvantaged communities have lesser employment opportunities, and usually face discrimination based on gender, caste or class, race or ethnicity. Cleaning, cooking, and caring for children and the elderly is almost universally regarded as women's work, so men rarely compete in this job market. Low levels of education and few marketable skills also play a role. (Ramirez,M., 2003). Rural poverty has increased in many countries, causing young women to move to urban areas in search of employment. Though the studies conducted on women domestic workers in India provide rich information about issues and challenges of domestic work, there is a lack of information about domestic workers.

Conclusion

Domestic workers are crucial for everyone's life. One day absences of domestic workers, that make us realize the value of a domestic worker in our lives. But despite their importance, it can be related that domestic workers are economically disadvantaged and undervalued with the work they have performed. Domestic workers are often from poor households or disadvantaged communities and largely are women since cleaning, cooking and caring for children and the elderly is almost universally accepted as women's work, so literally, men hardly compete in this job market. Low levels of education and lower marketable skills highly play a role in pushing them to domestic work. This household work, considered as a typical women's occupation, is often not perceived as "employment" and is looked upon as unskilled because most women have traditionally been considered capable of doing the work, and the skills that are taught by other women of the home are perceived to be innate. When they are paid, therefore, the work remains undervalued and poorly regulated.

A poor understanding of the rights of women domestic worker issues is the main cause for the absence of focus on services, information and research and therefore, empirical study and research based intervention is absent in Mizoram. Also, rural poverty has increased in many countries even in Mizoram where young women, in particular, migrate from rural areas to cities or from lower income states in search of employment. Moreover, the women domestic workers have been subjected to a series of injustices, deprivations and indignities in modern society due to the absence of meaningful legal safeguards, welfare measures and other provisions for their empowerment. Moreover, they are also a socially weak, economically vulnerable and politically disadvantaged section of Indian society. Due to these circumstances, they deserve proper care, protection and measures for empowerment in modern society on the basis of humanitarian considerations. Since women domestic workers do not have proper support networks and civil society support under these existing circumstances therefore experiencing exploitative situations and multi-faceted abuses where the national and international legal instruments are largely ineffective under these circumstances.

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