



DOMESTIC WOMEN WORKERS IN URBAN INFORMAL SECTOR: A CASE STUDY OF DAVANAGERE CITY

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ABSTRACT:

The increasing involvement of women in the workforce, along with changes in work organization and intensification, coupled with the absence of policies that balance work and family life, the reduction in state-provided care services, the feminization of international migration, and the aging of populations have collectively heightened the demand for care workers in recent years. This occupation is predominantly female, with women making up the majority of domestic workers, who represent a significant segment of the global informal employment sector and are among the most vulnerable worker groups. This paper is based on a primary survey conducted with women domestic workers in the city of Davanagere. The findings indicate that younger women are less willing to engage in domestic work. Due to a lack of alternatives, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds with low levels of education or illiteracy are compelled to take on roles as domestic laborers. Domestic work must be understood within the broader framework of patriarchy and the subjugation of women.



KEYWORDS: Women domestic work, urban informal sector.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The increasing involvement of women in the workforce, alterations in work organization, and the intensification of labor, coupled with the absence of policies that balance work and family life, the reduction in state-provided care services, the feminization of international migration, and the aging of populations have collectively heightened the demand for care workers in recent years (ILO, 2009).

The trend of feminization within this profession commenced in the mid-nineteenth century, a pattern that has persisted to this day, notwithstanding the global increase in educational attainment among women (Lutz, 2011). In the developing global economic landscape, marked by the rise of global cities, novel divisions of labor, and shifts in demographic makeup, paid domestic work primarily provided by lower-income families, especially women often replace unpaid household tasks and services. These tasks include cooking, cleaning, laundry, and caring for children and the elderly, among others. Consequently, domestic work plays a crucial role in shaping the relationship between family dynamics and the broader open economy (Bino et al., 2011).

The historical origins of domestic work are closely linked to the institutionalized slavery experienced by various oppressed groups, particularly those of African descent, as well as the societal subjugation of women. Consequently, the nature of work encompasses numerous social and political implications for individuals who engage in it as a means of earning a living. Primarily, domestic work is a vital component of the society in which we exist. As Anderson (2000) highlights in her publication, 'Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour', domestic work is indispensable; without it, humanity could not persist. It is essential to facilitate child-rearing, food preparation and distribution, as well as maintaining basic cleanliness and hygiene for individual and collective survival. Although this type of work is fundamentally crucial to society, there is no standardized job description for domestic work. It may encompass home cleaning and maintenance, childcare, cooking, or a combination of these tasks. The challenge of defining domestic work manifests for workers as an absence of a clear job description, which has significant repercussions for their working conditions. There exists a pervasive belief that this type of work is inherently associated with women, and in alignment with the prevailing patriarchal societal norms, such perceptions contribute to the notion that domestic work is intrinsically degrading (Bhattacharya et al., 2015).

1.1 Domestic Work and Informal Sector:

Domestic workers represent a substantial segment of the global workforce engaged in informal employment and are among the most at-risk categories of laborers.

Domestic workers play an essential role in the operation of middle and upper-middle-class households. Through their labor, working women and homemakers are able to maintain class distinctions, both between the impoverished and middle classes as well as between the lower and upper-middle classes. These domestic workers are employed by private households, frequently without well-defined employment terms, unregistered in any official records, and are excluded from the protections of labor legislation. According to estimates from the ILO, there are approximately 67 million domestic workers globally, not accounting for child domestic workers and this number is steadily rising in both developed and developing nations. Although a significant number of men are employed in this sector often as gardeners, drivers, or butlers it remains predominantly female, with women constituting 80 percent of all domestic workers. Their responsibilities encompass a variety of tasks, including house cleaning, cooking, laundry, childcare, caring for elderly or ill family members, and gardening, home security, driving for the family, and even tending to household pets.

Paid domestic work is on the rise in numerous economies around the world, yet it continues to be a largely unrecognized form of employment in many regions. Numerous domestic workers face extremely poor working conditions, are often undercompensated, lack social security benefits, and endure long hours in challenging and sometimes unsafe environments. Some are susceptible to trafficking or various forms of abuse sexual, physical, or psychological particularly when they are migrants (ILO, 2011).

1.2 Women and Domestic Work:

Poverty and unemployment are significant factors that have facilitated women's entry into the informal sector. According to the 2011 census report, there were 41.3 lakhs domestic workers in India, of which 27.9 lakhs were women. These women, primarily migrants from rural areas, face exploitation by their employers, as placement agencies have yet to develop strategies to protect them. The absence of adequate legislation and legal support has further exacerbated the vulnerability of these women domestic laborers.

Domestic work is often perceived as unskilled, remaining undervalued and poorly regulated (Roberts, 1997). This type of work has allowed many women to participate in the labor market and gain economic independence. However, this progress has not resulted in gender equality. Globally, household responsibilities and unpaid care work continue to create substantial obstacles to women's

participation in the labor market. The ILO has frequently emphasized the necessity of shifting the perception that caregiving is a private domestic duty exclusive to women.

Despite the numerous studies available in the literature concerning workers in the urban informal sector, research specifically focusing on women domestic workers remains limited. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of studies that approach this issue from an economic perspective. Consequently, this study aims to identify the challenges related to women's involvement in the urban informal sector and to explore how the lives of working women are influenced by economic development and social transformation. For this purpose, Davangere city has been selected as a case study to investigate 3 relevant issues:

- What are the socio-economic conditions of women domestic workers in Davangere city?
- What is the educational attainment of women engaged in domestic services?
- What are the working conditions experienced by women domestic workers?

This paper is structured into five sections. The second section reviews the existing literature on domestic workers to identify gaps in the current research. The third section details the research methodology employed. The fourth section presents the findings derived from the survey data. Finally, the concluding section summarizes the insights gained from the study.

2. DOMESTIC WORK: A REVIEW:

The body of literature concerning domestic work addresses the concept of the "commodification of care," wherein the informal and unpaid support and caregiving provided by family and friends predominantly women are fragmented into distinct tasks and roles that are performed in exchange for wages in the market (Zimmerman et al., 2002). This process involves deconstructing tasks into separate functions, leading to a specialization of care that is more technical and less holistic, thereby detaching it from the context of human relationships (Zimmermann et al., 2006, pp. 20-21).

Domestic workers are not merely employed to carry out household duties or to ease the dual burden faced by working women. They are also engaged as symbols of status, contributing to a sense of luxury (Neetha, 2008). The hierarchies present in the workers' countries of origin are frequently replicated in the host countries (Pattendath, 2008), or as articulated by Romero (1992), the dynamic between the domestic worker and the employer mirrors the inherent contradictions between capitalists and the proletariat. Consequently, despite the aforementioned empowerment, while the domestic worker may experience a decline in social status within the host country, she often concurrently achieves an elevation in social status within her country of origin (Anthias, 2000; Barber, 2000; Ozyegin, 2001; Moors, 2003).

As stated in the ILO report (2018), titled "Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work", domestic workers endure some of the most challenging working conditions within the care workforce and are especially susceptible to exploitation. Employment in this field is characteristically erratic and informal, suffering from inadequate labor and social protection coverage. Additionally, workplace violence is widespread in the domestic work sector.

The report (ILO, 2018) further highlights that the gender stereotyping associated with unpaid care work, along with the perception of care as aligned with women's "natural" tendencies and "innate" skills—rather than competencies developed through formal education or training—contributes significantly to the pronounced feminization of care employment.

Considering the inappropriate working and living conditions faced by women domestic workers, the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS, 2007) states: "Operating within the unregulated environment of a private household, often devoid of the safeguards provided by national labor laws, permits female domestic workers to be mistreated by their employers without consequence. Women frequently endure extended working hours and excessively demanding tasks. They may be rigidly restricted to their workplaces. The domestic workforce is excluded from

labor regulations that address critical employment-related matters such as working conditions, remuneration, social security, provident funds, retirement pensions, and maternity leave."

Unni and Rani (1999) seek to enhance the understanding of trends related to labor market participation and compensation in the domestic work sector in comparison to other sectors, utilizing the most recent household and labor survey data, along with legal information from a varied selection of developing nations (Brazil, Costa Rica, India, Indonesia, Mali, Mexico, Peru, Philippines, South Africa, Turkey, and Vietnam). The study examines the fundamental characteristics of female domestic workers, the deficiencies in minimum wage coverage, adherence, and the prevalence of minimum wage infractions. By presenting empirical data on labor market inequality along gender lines, the study explores the significance of minimum wages in mitigating gender disparities and addresses the issues surrounding regulatory frameworks. Ultimately, the research investigates compliance and enforcement strategies, contending that there is a necessity for comprehensive and innovative methods to ensure adherence to minimum wage laws within the domestic work sector. It concludes that establishing minimum wages for domestic workers is indeed a vital instrument for fostering gender equality within a broader strategy aimed at tackling informality and empowering workers.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Domestic service is characterized by a high degree of fragmentation and disorganization, which precluded the application of scientific sampling techniques for the selection of sample workers. Consequently, the study's scope was confined to specific localities. This research is founded on a primary survey. A purposive sample of 200 female domestic workers from diverse areas of the city was chosen utilizing a random sampling method. This approach was also intended to encompass various income localities and slums within Davangere city. Data collection was conducted using a structured questionnaire that addressed the socio-economic profiles of the women domestic workers, working conditions, and their involvement in the decision-making process, among other factors. The data were analyzed using SPSS, employing simple statistical tools such as measures of central tendency, chi-square tests for the analysis. Data collection took place from May to August 2024.

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Female domestic workers represent a marginalized group within the unorganized sector workforce. They form an exploited segment of the informal sector. On a global scale, approximately 30 percent of female domestic workers are not covered by labor laws, and an even larger number do not receive actual minimum protections in their workplaces (Augustina& Singh, 2016). These women are part of a vulnerable segment of society. They come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and lack the necessary human capital development.

4.1 Education Level

Poverty and unemployment are significant factors that have facilitated women's entry into the informal sector. Due to a lack of alternatives, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who possess low levels of education or are illiterate, are compelled to work as domestic laborers (Vadegari & Soundari, 2016).

The majority of women (68 percent) in the current survey were either illiterate or had only completed primary education, while 28 percent had attained education up to the elementary level. This indicates that women engaged in domestic work have a low level of human capital development. It can also be posited that the low level of education contributes to women resorting to domestic work. For a significant number of these workers, domestic work is the sole option available.

Additionally, it is noteworthy to explore whether religion influences an individual's education. Table 3 illustrates that women from all religious backgrounds exhibit extremely low educational

attainment, limited to primary education. Approximately 31 percent of Hindu women have education beyond the primary level. There are no illiterate women among the Muslim and Christian populations.

Table 1: Distribution of the Respondents by Educational level and Religion

Religion	Education level				Total
	Illiterate	Primary	Elementary	SSC/ HSC	
Hindu	19.5	43.5	26.5	5.0	94.5
Muslim	0.0	1.5	0.5	0.0	2.0
Christian	0.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	3.0
Other	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.5
Total	19.5	46.5	28.0	6.0	100

To understand if religion has any impact on education, a chi-square test was carried out.

H₀: There is no impact of religion on the education of an individual.

Table 2: Chi-square Test for Education level and Religion

Chi-Square Tests			
Particulars	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.100	9	0.208
Likelihood Ratio	10.695	9	0.297
No. of Valid Cases	200		

The results show that the chi-square calculated is much higher than the critical value at 0.005 per cent significant level. However, the asymptotic significance (two-sided) value of 0.208 implies that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected (Table 2). It means religion as such does not affect the education level of the households. The chi-square test for caste and education also yields similar results, and thus, it can be said that factors such as caste and religion do not have much impact on educational level of women.

4.2 Economic Conditions

Domestic work is considered as unskilled work. It is menial, has low prestige and is therefore usually performed by women from poorer families. What drives these women into taking up domestic work? One reason is low level of education or human capital formation of these women and another reason is their poor economic conditions. Table 3 and chart 1 show the total family income and the per capita income of the respondents respectively.

Table 3: Total Income of the Family

Income group (in Rs.)	Frequency	Percentage
less than 10000	43	21.5
10001-15000	111	55.5
15001-20000	29	14.5
20001-25000	9	4.5
25001-30000	8	4.0
Total	200	100.0

Rapid economic changes also majorly altered the lives of lower-income groups, with making two ends meet often being difficult for families if both spouses are not engaged in paid work. Sky

rocketing of the price of household commodities, increasing cost of living, increasing prices of educational and health facilities, withdrawal of the state welfare mechanism from primary government services, and increasing takeover of market forces resulted in an increasing number of women from such families entering paid labour. Being less educated or illiterate and unskilled, these women are often left with no option other than engaging in domestic work (Paul, 2011).

As shown in Table 3, 77 percent of the respondents have a total family income of upto Rs. 15,000 per month. Only 4 percent of the respondents have a monthly family income of Rs. 25,000-30,000. This comes to around 83.5 percent of the families having a monthly per capita income of less than or upto Rs. 5,000. This is much lower as compared to the average per capita income of the state of Gujarat. In fact, 7.5 per cent of the respondents having a per capita income of upto Rs. 2,000 are below poverty line considering an average daily expenditure of Rs. 47 per person per day for urban areas.

As discussed earlier, 11.5 per cent of the women are the sole earners in the family, these women are constantly under pressure for earnings. As shown in the table 9 and the chart 1, 83.5 per cent of the women have an average per capita income of up to Rs. 5,000 or less. Of these, almost 50 per cent of the women have a per capita monthly income in the range of Rs. 3,000-5,000.

The per capita state GDP during 2018-19 was around Rs. 2.25 lakh per person considering an average of Rs. 13,000 per month. All the families in the survey belong to the income group below average state per capita income. Thus, low family income is another factor that pushes these women into domestic work.

4.4 Women and Decision Making:

Decision making involves the process of identifying and selecting alternatives based on the values and preferences of the individual making the decision. The act of making a decision suggests that there are various options to consider, and in this context, it is essential not only to recognize as many of these alternatives as possible but also to select the one that aligns best with our goals, objectives, desires, values, and so forth (UN, 1997). Decision-making is a fundamental process that supports all aspects of family resource management. Women bear numerous responsibilities and engage in a wide range of tasks related to managing the family and maintaining the household, among other duties. Despite fulfilling these responsibilities, their participation in the decision-making process, particularly concerning financial matters, remains limited (Raju & Rani, 1991). In patriarchal societies, socio-economic conditions, along with other factors, influence their decision-making capabilities.

Consequently, it is intriguing to explore the role of these women domestic workers from impoverished families who make significant contributions to family decision-making.

Table 4 : Women's Participation in Decision Making

Decisions relating to	Self	Husband & wife together	Elders in family
Normal daily routine items to be purchased	3.0	63.0	14.0
Purchase of expensive items	0.0	58.5	21.5
Own income	5.0	67.0	18.0
Children's education	4.5	69.0	16.5
Other decisions like children's marriage	2.0	71.0	17.0

As shown in Table 4, majority of the women participate in decision making equally with their husbands. This proportion is more than 50 percent in all the decision-making processes. A cross-category comparison shows that women have an edge over in making decisions relating to the normal daily routine items to be purchased. This is because household is considered as women's domain. They

do consult their husbands (67percentofwomen) for their own income as well. But given the prevalence of the joint family system, elders in the family do have a say in the decision-making process. Thus, socio-cultural factors do have an influence on the decision-making processes.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Paid domestic work is on the rise in numerous economies around the globe; however, it continues to be a largely overlooked form of employment in many nations. Furthermore, it is typically regarded as unskilled labor, perceived as a natural extension of women's responsibilities within their households.

The current study has revealed that the younger generation is less willing to engage in domestic work. Factors such as poverty and unemployment have paved the way for women to enter the informal labor market. Due to a lack of alternatives, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who possess low levels of education and high rates of illiteracy, find themselves compelled to work as domestic laborers.

Recently, the cost of living in urban areas has been on the rise. This trend is leading to an increasing number of women seeking paid employment. The present study indicates that, in comparison to unmarried women, a greater number of married women are opting for domestic work.

Domestic work as a profession is often undervalued. This perception of undervaluation stems from the belief that women's caregiving and household responsibilities do not constitute actual work—reflecting a patriarchal view of women's labor. Domestic work must be understood within the broader framework of patriarchy and the oppression of women. Patriarchy restricts women's freedom of movement, access to economic resources, and both their productive and reproductive capabilities, transferring these controls to men. In many societies, women are primarily responsible for both biological and social reproduction. Despite being essential for human survival, these activities are neither recognized as work nor classified as economic contributions, rendering them invisible, unacknowledged, and unpaid. Typically, it is women and girls who engage in socially reproductive labor globally. The continuous and monotonous efforts they provide are not regarded as valuable work (Jagori, 2010).

The proposed National Policy on domestic workers acknowledges the significance of domestic workers and the challenges they face in the market, emphasizing the necessity for 'inclusion' rather than 'exclusion' of domestic workers within current legislation, as well as the need to "supplement these with laws specifically for domestic workers" (ILO, 2011). While regulating and protecting domestic work can enhance conditions in the short term, the long-term solution to eradicate inequality and vulnerability lies in the collectivization of domestic responsibilities and the equitable distribution of these tasks between men and women (Duguid & Weber, 2019). However, such transformations must engage a broader segment of society, including the provision of quality public childcare, social services, and healthcare, shared parental leave for both women and men, and the establishment of gender equality in wages and income tax policies. Ultimately, it necessitates that everyone capable of performing cleaning duties should undertake this responsibility themselves (Calleman, 2011).

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