

## **Paid Domestic Workers in Ernakulam District, Kerala, India**

**Titson Devassy\***  
**Lizy James†**

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### **Abstract**

Domestic workers constitute one of the largest segments of unorganised workers in India and it is one job where men are outnumbered by women. Domestic workers lack respect and recognition from their employers and are mostly underpaid, prevailing in a state of dependency. This paper, based on a qualitative study, aims to find out the nature of work and work related problems of women domestic workers, and to uncover the factors which contribute to their entry into paid domestic work. Samples are purposively selected from the domestic workers' groups promoted by Ernakulam Social Service Society, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in the Ernakulam District. The data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and analysed using interpretive methods. Eight major themes, namely, working hours, place of employment, type of work performed by the domestic workers in employer's home, the employee and employer relationship, problems experienced at work place, income, occupational health, and family support, emerged in this study to explain the nature of work, and work related problems of paid women domestic workers. The domestic workers' perceptions about factors that contribute to their entry into paid domestic work is discussed under socio-economic backwardness and educational status. The findings of the study will help to identify vulnerability in paid domestic work and frame a strategy for organising and globalising domestic workers in the context of the International Labour Organisation's latest efforts in promoting decent work for domestic workers.

### **Keywords**

unorganised sector, domestic workers, work related problems, Kerala

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### **Introduction**

In the last few decades the participation of women in paid work has increased. In developing countries women workers engage more in the unorganised sector rather than that in the organised sector (Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor, 2008). A recent study indicates that more than 90 per cent of the working women in India are engaged as wage labourers in the unorganised sector, many of them belonging to the economically poor, socially backward and oppressed sections of the society (Parveen, 2014). Among the various unorganised sectors, domestic work is one of the rapidly growing segments in India, where the female participation is generally higher compared to their male counterparts, and is often poorly regulated and unprotected. The International Labour Organisation's estimates suggested that

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\*Center for Doctoral Research, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences (Autonomous), Kalamassery P.O, Kochi, Kerala, 683104, India. Email: titson80@gmail.com

†Lizy James, Puthupparambil, Kanakkary P.O, Kottayam, Kerala, 686632, India.

there were 52.6 million domestic workers in the world in 2010 (ILO, 2011b). The National Domestic Workers Movement in India estimated that 20 million people work as domestic workers throughout the country (John, 2013). The 61<sup>st</sup> round of Employment and Unemployment Survey, conducted by National Sample Survey Office between July 2004 and June 2005, suggested that the number of domestic workers in India was 4.2 million in 2004–05 (ILO, 2011b).

One factor which boosted paid domestic work was the increased participation of educated women in work. Skilled working women seek help from others to perform their role in the family which opened opportunities for large numbers of unskilled women workers. Even though the role played by domestic workers in facilitating the participation of a large segment of educated women in productive work is higher, society in general considered domestic workers as unproductive and thus they are poorly recognised. The biggest problem facing domestic workers across the country is their non-recognition as workers (Geetha and Malarvizhi, 2014). The present study is an attempt to explore the nature of work and work related problems of domestic workers and to identify the factors that contribute to the entry of large number of women in domestic work.

### **Domestic Work and Domestic Workers**

The ILO Convention No. 189 defines domestic work as work performed in or for a household or households. This work may include tasks such as cleaning the house, cooking, washing and ironing clothes, taking care of children, or elderly or sick members of a family, gardening, guarding the house, and driving for the family. The Convention 189 of ILO defines the domestic worker as, “any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship” and categorically suggested that any person who is doing the work occasionally were excluded from the purview of domestic worker (ILO, 2011a: 4). According to Dar (2014: 121), “...domestic worker is one who carries out the household chores like cleaning utensils, washing clothes, sweeping and cleaning the floor, cooking or assisting the employer in the kitchen, look after the small children or accompany them to school, and so on. It can be on a part-time or full-time basis for one or more employer for nominal wages. ” Neetha (2003:119), defines the term domestic worker as a “person who is engaged in part-time or full-time domestic work in return for remuneration payable in cash or kind for a fixed period.” Domestic workers are classified into three categories, such as part-time workers (*Thika* workers), full-time domestic workers, and residential workers. Part-time domestic workers are employed in two or more places and work for 2–3 hours in each home. Full-time workers are domestic workers who work only in a single place and usually work from morning to evening for a specific employer. Residential workers are persons who stay with their employer the whole day (Trivedi, 2009).

### **Nature of Work, Working Conditions and Factors Contributing to Paid Domestic Work**

Paid domestic work is often considered an undervalued profession, not only by the employers, but also by the domestic workers themselves. In a society dominated by patriarchal values, domestic work is always identified with women, reinforcing the worldview that paid domestic work is simply an extension of what women are already doing in their homes but in somebody else’s premises. Even though the domestic workers are contributing enormously to the global economy, their work is often unorganised, overworked, underpaid, and abused (Tomei and Belser, 2011). Most of the domestic workers are exploited by their employers due to their poverty and weak positions (Vanajakshi and Sharadaambi, 2013). Domestic workers are characterised by hours of work, minimum wages, absence of any additional payment for extra work, lack of any leave, sexual abuse from the part of their male counterparts, and no rest

(Madhumathi, 2013). It was observed that domestic workers come from poor living conditions and are deprived of minimum wage, overtime pay, public holidays, timely payment of salaries, and standard daily working hours (Kundu, 2007). Women domestic workers are in a deplorable condition and pointed out that their caste and gender plays an important role in contributing to their dreadful situation. The study identifies economic backwardness, absence of continuous work, lack of bargaining power, deficiency in credit facilities, substance abuse by their male partners, death of spouse, and absence of any assets as the conditions which result in the fragile condition of domestic workers (Dar, 2014). Another issue experienced by domestic workers, apart from their nature of work and working conditions, is that domestic workers suffer poor self-esteem due to a variety of reasons. There are many instances where employers do not allow their domestic workers to share eating utensils, drinking glasses, toiletries, sheets, and laundry facilities with their employers due to cultural or racial prejudice (Grande and Kerr, 1998). Goel (2014) pointed out that the domestic workers are overburdened with their work and had limited time to sleep and rest and they feel overwhelmed and exhausted with the workload. According to her domestic workers suffer from distress, fear, sense of worthlessness, denigration, and low self-esteem.

There are many factors which contribute to the increase in the number of women domestic workers in our society. John (2013) suggests that the shift from agrarian society to one that is service-based, and the increase in middle class society, have an impact on the increase in the number of domestic workers. Furthermore, the participation of more educated women in employment, created opportunities for unskilled women to fill the vacuum they created in their homes by performing household tasks.

Adequate literature is not available on domestic workers, especially in the Indian context. There is a dearth of studies in Kerala on this topic. Most of the available studies are quantitative in nature and often fail to capture the real experiences of domestic workers. The authentic lives of paid domestic workers in their place of employment and the circumstances which cause the entry of thousands of women into this job need to be scientifically investigated for any interventions and efforts to mainstream this vulnerable sector.

## **The Study**

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To find out the nature and work related problems of domestic workers.
2. To find out the contributing factors of paid domestic work.

### **Methodology**

This paper is based on a qualitative study to explore the nature of work and work related problems of paid domestic workers in the Ernakulam District. The samples are purposively selected from the domestic workers' groups promoted by the Ernakulam Social Service Society (ESSS), an NGO based in Ernakulam District. The researcher selected 12 domestic workers who are regularly attending their group meetings and have some exposure at leadership level from each region of ESSS - Ernakulam, Chathiath, Palarivattom, Tripunithura, Kalamassery, Aluva, Koonammavu, and Vypin. The domestic workers purposively selected from each region form the group for a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Based on the interaction in the FGD, the researcher again selected a domestic worker from FGD participants in each region for conducting in-depth interviews. In this way, the researcher conducted eight FGDs and eight in-depth interviews, one each in eight regions of ESSS. In total, 96 domestic workers took part in the current study. The collected data was analysed using the interpretive approach. A FGD guide and interview guide were used to acquire data. Data on working hours, place of employment, type of work performed by the domestic workers, the employee and employer

relationship, problems at work place, income, occupational health, and family support were obtained to explain the nature of work and work related problems of paid women domestic workers. The domestic workers' perceptions about factors that contribute to their entry into paid domestic work were discussed based on their socio-economic and educational status.

Informed consent from the participants were collected which allowed them to withdraw participation at any stage. To maintain the confidentiality of the domestic workers, the study used pseudonyms, which allowed for the use of verbatim quotes from the participants.

## Findings

### Socio-Demographic Profile of Domestic Workers

The socio-demographic profiles of domestic workers are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Domestic Workers**

<i>Factors</i>	<i>No of Domestic Workers</i>
<b>Age in Years</b>	
18–39	34
40–59	46
60 and above	16
<b>Education</b>	
Illiterate	1
Primary	19
Secondary	64
Higher Secondary	12
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Unmarried	2
Married	54
Widowed	24
Separated	16
<b>Year of Experience in Years</b>	
0–5	21
6–10	53
11 and above	22

### Working Hours

The two categories of domestic workers which took part in the study were part-time and full-time. The data collected suggested that part-time workers worked for 3–4 homes everyday, and spent one and half to three hours in each home. Time spent in a particular home depends upon the duties to be performed and wages paid. Full-time domestic workers worked from morning to evening in a home. Both part-and full-time workers worked for eight hours or more a day. In most of the cases, they were not able to keep to the allocated time because of last minute tasks assigned to them which made it impossible for them to reach their other worksites on time.

### Place of Employment

The majority of domestic workers who participated in FGDs and interviews were working in residential homes and flats. Twelve of them were working in offices or some form of

commercial establishment. For those working in employers' homes or flats, there was no time or place to rest.

*"I don't have time to rest, after finishing work in one home. I have to rush to the next. If I failed to reach on time my employers will get angry."* Poornima's words emphasise that domestic workers have to work continuously without proper rest. For those who work in offices there is some place to rest, yet they cannot do so as their supervisors assign them more tasks or they must rush to other offices.

### **Type of Work Performed by Domestic Workers**

Anitha explains the work domestic workers do: *"It's better to ask what role we don't have to perform. I am doing all duties I used to perform in my home... cleaning, washing clothes, cooking, looking after the children and aged. Sometimes have to go to market."* The majority of part-time domestic workers believed they had to clean utensils, wash clothes, and sweep. One domestic worker said that she must even clean the ceiling fan and roof, tasks which are usually performed by men. Some must help the employers in kitchen by cutting vegetables, cleaning fish and meat, and grinding. But usually they were not allowed to cook. Very few domestic workers suggested that they engaged in cooking.

### **The Employee and Employer Relationship**

The relationship between the employee and employer is discussed under three sub-themes: relationship, grievance redressal, and availing the rights of domestic workers.

#### **Relationship**

*"I am working to support my family. There are instances of warm relationship with my employer's family and opposite of that also. Situation in one home is different from that of others. But as the job is my need am not bothered about all these things. I need money to support my family."* This was the first reaction of Ms. Moly when the researcher asked about the relationship between the domestic workers and their employers. A small number of domestic workers, especially the ones who are working in a particular home for years, remarked that they have good relationships with their employers and felt free to share their personal matters with them.

#### **Grievances and Redressal**

In private households there is no system to deal with domestic workers' grievances at the work place. If they have anything to complain about they usually approach the female head of the family. In most of the offices a system prevails to address such grievances or issues. In a few cases there is a different version: *"To whom should I complain? Here the owner himself is the only staff available,"* says Ratnamma, engaged in sweeping and swabbing in four small-scale shops in town. Here there is no grievance redressal system as the shops are managed single handedly by the owner.

#### **Availing the Rights of Domestic Workers**

When asked about the awareness of employers regarding domestic workers' rights, the majority replied negatively. A domestic worker complained that she was forbidden to use the employer's details for registering at the welfare board. Another domestic worker observed that they should give more publicity and media attention for their new trade union, Kerala Domestic Workers Forum (KDWF), registered in November 2016 to protect their rights. *My employers are taking long holidays for one or other reasons, but reluctant to recognise my*

*right to have a leave,*” was the opinion of Ms. Zeenath. Ms. Sheela points towards the ignorance of domestic workers regarding their rights while she quipped that, *“even we don’t know our rights, then how can we blame our employers?”* This clearly portrays the domestic workers using their rights in general.

### **Problems at the Work Place**

Domestic workers suffer from a variety of problems starting from delayed payment to verbal abuse at their work place. Sometimes they must get into arguments with their employers for correct payment. However, some domestic workers speak of good employers who not only pay their wages on time but also advance payments if need be. However, Ms. Mini shared that, *“even after working for more than five years, when I asked for a wage hike, I was expelled from the job without any prior notice.”* Her experience is not an isolated one and it forces domestic workers not to react on many occasions, or ask for wage increases.

When the participants were asked about any form of abuse at their work place, their first reaction was a smile. The majority of them were not ready to reveal such sensitive information. A domestic worker pointed out that verbal abuse was common and it happened when the domestic worker asked for leave, their wages or a wage increase. Ms. Sudha raised a serious concern here: *“We are actually working with fear; there is no guarantee for our safety especially when working in situations such as men alone was present in work place.”* In short, domestic workers experience multifaceted problems, such as delayed payment, verbal abuse, denial of leave, uncertainty in their job, and work security, but often choose to be silent as they fear negative consequences.

### **Income**

The study found that the wages of domestic workers depend upon whether they worked in rural or urban areas. The domestic workers’ pay is less in rural area compared to that of urban. Therefore, domestic workers engaged in part-time domestic work and sought employment in multiple homes to increase their earnings. A substantial number of domestic workers received some kind of gift or additional cash during festivals.

Not all domestic workers get free food. *“If you want food, we will cut Rs.500 for that,”* says Ms. Suhra, remembering the words of her employer. She is a domestic worker who works from early morning, 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. It is not her story alone as many others were also in a similar situation. Given such cuts to their wages, many domestic workers in private houses did not want food from their employers.

### **Occupational Health**

Irrespective of their age and experiences, the majority of domestic workers who participated in FGDs and in-depth interviews, suffered with joint and back pain. Some suffered with skin problems. Domestic workers, especially those who worked in residential homes, explained they are not allowed to use washing machines and vacuum cleaners. Ms. Janaki shared that, *“it is very stressful job, never get any time to rest. After completing in others kitchen I have to do it again in my home.”* All these insights emphasise that domestic workers do not work in a healthy environment.

### **Family Support**

Domestic workers need to perform tasks in their own home in addition to the tasks performed in their work places. The support of family is decisive in continuing with their work. When

the researchers asked about the support of family, domestic workers replied positively. They said that most of the time their children and at times their spouses or in-laws support them in their household tasks. But this was not applicable to all. Many domestic workers performed all their household tasks by themselves, especially those who were widowed and separated.

#### **Factors Contributing the Paid Domestic Work**

*“I am a widow and have to look after my two kids. Don’t know any other job so choose this job 10 years back as it doesn’t need any additional skill,”* said Ms. Jaya during the interview. Even though paid domestic work is considered a mediocre job, a variety of circumstances lead a person to choose it. The study reveals that domestic workers come from poor economic backgrounds. In many cases, domestic workers were either widows or separated and bear the burden of family responsibilities. This means they have no choice but to take any job. For some women their spouses are alcoholic and not taking up the responsibilities of a family. In addition, the majority of women do not have any technical skills to support other forms of employment. *“I took up this job not only due to lack of any alternative skill but due to the flexibility of timing.”* Even though it is only a few hours, people like Priya took the job due to its flexibility – it allows them to earn and take care of their families.

#### **Discussion**

Everyday tens of millions of people throughout the world clean other people’s homes, cook meals for others, and watch over their children. Their work contributes to national economies and labour markets by enabling others to carry out their own jobs (ILO, 2013). The situation is not different in the Ernakulam District, where the domestic workers are mainly from poor and socially backward sections, working in other people’s homes, usually that of the rich and middle class. Apart from working in their own home, they have to work from morning to evening or even later, without proper recognition. Domestic workers are in a state of dependency, exploitation and quasi bondage and the biggest problem facing domestic workers across the country is their non-recognition as workers (Geetha and Malarvizhi, 2014).

There is no agreement regarding the wages and tasks to be performed. The tasks assigned to the worker are typically not specified at the time of appointment resulting in a workload that is in most cases far beyond the capacity of the worker and disproportionate to the wage paid. In addition, there is a tendency to systematically increase the number of chores to be performed (D'Souza, 2010). The educational and socio-economic backgrounds of the majority of women facilitates the entry of many of them into this profession. As the study is conducted among the small group of domestic workers associated with Ernakulam Social Service Society, the findings of the study cannot be generalised to all domestic workers.

‘Decent work for domestic workers’ is the slogan echoed all over the world in the last two decades. Efforts were taken by various national and international organisations, including ILO, to ensure the dignity and rights of domestic workers. But still many countries, including India, are reluctant to ratify the Convention 189 and its recommendations 201. An exclusive law for domestic workers is still a dream for domestic workers. The study will help to raise the voice in support of domestic workers and bring these issues to the attention of the social work profession. There is always ample space for scientific investigation to create sustainable models in organising domestic workers, and to find out the attitudes of employers and the families of domestic workers.

#### **Conclusion**

The study captures the situation of paid domestic workers in our society. The exclusion of domestic workers from the framework of an exclusive law and the age-old reluctance of society in acknowledging domestic work as “work” makes the life of millions of domestic workers arduous, and forces them to work in isolation, leaving them with low self-worth. The unfavourable working conditions experienced by domestic workers coupled with the negative attitudes of employers towards domestic workers make their lives even more miserable. Since the attention paid to the problems of domestic workers is minimal, the findings of the study have special relevance. It may illuminate the numerous dark areas of paid domestic workers and attract more scientific research into various aspects of domestic work.

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