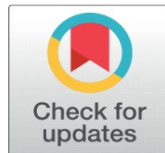
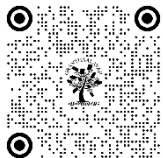


PLIGHT OF FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS IN INDIA: DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

India is a country with 698.29 million of female population as per CNN, 32.8% of which are engaged in labor force according to Directorate General of Employment. A major chunk of this population are employed as domestic workers. Although the official estimate of domestic worker population is 4.2 million the actual figures are even more than 50 million. It is estimated that around three fourth of this population are women (Ghosh, 2013).

In the current age urban middle-class segment are the major recruiters of domestic workers as these workers have become the backbone of their smooth day to day life (Otso Harju, 2017). Usually, domestic workers are employed on part-time, full time or round-the-clock basis. As the domestic workers are engaged in household work like cooking, cleaning etc., this is not considered as a skilled job. Primarily, illiterate and semi-literate women engage in domestic work even without substantial rights and benefits (Sandhya S. J, 2019).

On one hand it contributes a lot to women empowerment and financial independence; on the other hand, domestic work being an informal sector, witness challenges of low wage, long hours of work, frequent change in nature of job etc. (Baboo; Panwar, 1984). Research done on “Minimum wages for domestic work” put on record that, social understanding of household work was the critical factor in understanding the state’s response in understanding the issues faced by the domestic workers apart from labour market issues that govern legislative interventions (Neetha, 2013).

In this regard, the current study focuses on an objective review of various literature which attempts to highlight the current status of females engaged in domestic work sector so that it can pave ways to bridge the inherent gaps and exploring the feasibility of bringing this sector into the organized format.

1. INTRODUCTION

As per International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) Domestic Workers Convention, 2011, Article 1: (a) The term ‘domestic work’ means work performed in or for a household or households; Their responsibilities typically span various domestic duties, including but not limited to cleaning, sweeping, laundry, caregiving, driving, and security services.

In recent years, both the demand for and supply of domestic workers in India have seen a notable rise and they have become an important part of our societal setup. Economist Jayati Ghosh (2014) attributes this trend to two key factors.

Firstly, even with India’s significant economic growth, job creation has remained limited. Secondly, widening economic inequality has contributed to two parallel developments: while many individuals are compelled to seek self-employment due to income pressures, an expanding middle class now possesses the financial means to spend more and employ domestic help (ibid.)

Domestic work constitutes 3.5% of total female employment in India, making it the third-largest sector for women after agriculture and construction, with the number of women and girls in this workforce growing by 75% over the past decade

Domestic workers are often called ‘maids’ or ‘servants’, terms that make them feel inferior and insecure. This language adds to the lack of respect for the work they do. They are frequently underpaid, overworked, and denied basic rights like fair wages and safe working conditions. Most live-in workers put in at least 15 hours of work every day, including weekends. Part-time workers usually work in 3–4 homes, spending 8–10 hours daily. In many cases, they work anywhere between 8 to over 18 hours a day. Benefits like paid leave, medical care, and rest are often not provided and depend entirely on the employer’s goodwill.

Suspicion is another mistreatment done to them. For any kind of theft or missing item, they are blamed first and put to mental and physical abuse. Many workers who come from rural and tribal areas find it difficult to adjust to the new environment and surroundings.

Generally domestic workers are seen as helpers or housemaids which seemingly restrict their work to just cooking and cleaning mainly (Neetha 2009). Whereas practically they carry out numerous types of jobs which clearly does not fall under the purview of definition of domestic worker because of which this sector does not get recognition as an occupation (ibid.). Many a times it is seen that these workers are employed in multiple households and the total time put together exceeds the requirements for a full-time worker with normal working hours as per Labour law, but as they are not working under a single employer they are not covered under the law (Neetha 2017). Such gaps and loopholes make the whole situation grimmer.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To analyse the current status of female domestic workers in India
- 2) To review the major challenges faced by the female domestic workers
- 3) To identify the major loopholes and issues in the domestic work sector.
- 4) To develop a conceptual model highlighting the dynamics of the sector.

Sr. No.	Researchers	Year	Subject	Findings
1	Deepa Singh	2023	Analysis On The Problems Of Women Domestic Workers In India	<p>Around 80% of the workers are not satisfied with their wages and feel exploited.</p> <p>A structured leave policy is absent.</p> <p>Female workers face lot of challenges at home front as well.</p> <p>Current legal framework and government initiatives are not sufficient as of now.</p>
2	Bino Paul, Ventakesh Moorthy, Sushant Datta.	2018	Working & Living Conditions of Women Domestic Workers: Insights from a Survey.	<p>They are a classic example of critical deficits in human development and lack the core entitlement of freedom.</p> <p>Trade unions can help making the sector more organised.</p> <p>This work can be made more decent and visible by mobilising workers’ collectives.</p>
3	Neymat Chadha		Domestic Workers In India: An Invisible Workforce	<p>These workers are susceptible to different forms of abuse based on gender, female gender being more prone.</p> <p>Caste based abuse is also prevalent in the sector.</p> <p>In the last few years placement agencies have grown rapidly which is attempting to formalise the sector. Many of these are collaborating with cooperative societies, trade unions and voluntary organisations</p> <p>With no formal contracts, ineffective legislation and poor bargaining power, the categorisation of domestic workers as ‘workers’ is merely theoretical.</p>

4	B. S. Sumalath, Lekha D.Bhat and K. P. Chitra	2021	Impact of Covid-19 on Informal Sector: A Study of Women Domestic Workers in India	<p>There is a pressing need for a comprehensive national policy, supported by state-level initiatives, that specifically addresses the concerns of women domestic workers. In the absence of such measures, they will continue to face persistent poverty, health risks, and social marginalization.</p> <p>These workers often endure poor working conditions without access to social security. Challenges such as inadequate pay, occupational health issues, limited leave provisions, weak bargaining power, and family-related responsibilities further impact their well-being.</p> <p>Additionally, informal employment arrangements, undefined wages and hours, and gaps in legal and policy frameworks intensify their economic and social vulnerability.</p>
5	Anna George, M. Nandhini	2024	A Study on Work- Life Quality of Female Domestic Workers	<p>the workers do not want their next generation to continue with similar type of work. They hope to have a safe future and more dignified work for their children which will provide them with healthy working conditions.</p> <p>Self-esteem and worth are many a times challenged in this sector and the sector is overall stigmatised.</p>
6	Shridhar. S. N, Thippesh. K	2023	Understanding Domestic Work: Exploring Issues, Literature, and Policy Perspectives	<p>Marital status and family-related responsibilities often play a significant role in influencing women to take up domestic work. The relative ease of access to employment and income in this sector, despite the absence of formal qualifications, makes it a default option for many—especially those limited by caste-based discrimination, lack of education, and inadequate skills. As a result, they are frequently compelled to accept unfavourable terms set by employers, including low wages, extended working hours, delayed payments, and exposure to abuse and exploitation.</p> <p>The absence of robust legal frameworks and the government's inaction in extending legal and social protection further exacerbate their vulnerability (Mangilal, 2021).</p> <p>To improve their conditions and safeguard their rights, it is essential to foster meaningful engagement through evidence-based policy dialogue that recognizes domestic workers as legitimate members of the labor force and upholds their dignity.</p>
7	Rufina Augustine, Rupesh Kumar Singh	2016	Condition & Problems of Female Domestic Workers (With Special Reference to L.D.A. Colony in Lucknow City, India)	<p>The unorganized workforce in India largely comprises individuals from socially and economically disadvantaged groups, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Due to their poor financial conditions, their educational attainment remains low, leading to a lack of awareness about their fundamental rights. This study reveals that female domestic workers (FDWs) also come from such marginalized socio-economic backgrounds. They are generally unaware of welfare schemes, social security benefits, relevant laws or legislations, and even the role of NGOs working to support their well-being.</p>
8	S. Kumar	2020	Challenges and Working Conditions of Women Domestic	<p>Most of the women domestic workers are in this occupation as they lack other substantial skill and have low literacy rate. This in turn is responsible for low income, lack of awareness and sensitivity, poverty,</p>

			Workers: An Overview	landlessness, etc, this is the reason for grim situation even after taking positive measures through multiple development programmes for these workers. Therefore, a planned social inclusion has to be ensured with well targeted developmental programmes.
9	Chandramouli, Kodandarama	2018	Women Domestic Workers in India: An Analysis	<p>Majority of the workers belong to vulnerable communities and backward areas. They are mostly illiterate; poverty struck and lack specific skills and thus they are pushed to the lowest segment of the society.</p> <p>In the current working environment, women workers are deprived of civil society support and support networks</p> <p>They are often exploited and subjected to various kinds of abuses. The current legal framework is with lot of loopholes and thus fails to serve the purpose.</p>
10	Prakash Yadao Khillare, Madhulika Ajay Sonawane	2016	The Impact of Work-Life of Women Domestic Workers on their Family-Life	<p>Women workers find it difficult to balance between family and work, because of which many a times they loose out on family support and face lot of stress.</p> <p>Lack of peace due to insecure income and lack of cooperation from family causes many health issues both physical and mental.</p> <p>Major issues could be resolved if a fixed wage system is implemented, also government's proactive approach is needed for developing and implementing policies specifically targeting to address these problems.</p>
11	C. Lalrempui, H. Elizabeth	2020	Issues and Challenges of Female Domestic Workers: An Analysis	<p>Domestic work continues to be informal and undervalued, with workers often denied fair wages, reasonable working hours, safe environments, and basic employment benefits. The lack of strong trade unions and government oversight has left women domestic workers particularly vulnerable, exposing them to persistent inequality, exploitation, and a lack of legal and social support systems necessary for their empowerment.</p> <p>It is imperative to ratify ILO Convention No. 189, <i>Decent Work for Domestic Workers</i>, to ensure that domestic work is formally recognized, workers receive fair wages and are treated with dignity and respect as rightful members of the workforce.</p>
12	Nisha Sengar, Sapna Ratan Shah	2024	Women in the Informal Labor Sector: The Situation of Domestic Helpers in Indian Households	<p>Domestic work is often dismissed as unskilled and inherently female labor, leading to its devaluation, lack of protection, and the continued exclusion of domestic workers from policy as well as society.</p> <p>Ensuring the formal recognition of domestic workers through legal protections, welfare boards, awareness campaigns, and support for unionization is vital to securing their rights, fair wages, and dignified working conditions.</p> <p>There is an urgent need for comprehensive policy action and a shift in societal attitudes to improve the status of domestic workers and safeguard their fundamental rights.</p>
13	Anjul Kumar, Hema Singh	2022	Challenges Of Inequality And Insecurity Of Women In The Informal Sector In	<p>The Indian state's tendency to view women primarily through familial roles rather than as workers has led to welfare policies focused on maternity benefits rather than labor rights, highlighting the need to shift toward structural poverty reduction by formally recognizing women as part of the workforce.</p>

			India	
14	Shashikala.T	2023	Issues And Challenge Of Women Domestic Workers: A Sociological Study	<p>Limited education prevents many domestic workers from understanding their rights and entitlements, making it a moral responsibility—especially for NGOs and semi-government bodies—to raise awareness and ensure they benefit from available government schemes.</p> <p>A comprehensive policy for domestic workers should ensure their right to register with the state labor department, form associations or trade unions, and receive protection against abuse, harassment, and violence.</p>

3. MAJOR CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS

- **Poor Employment Conditions:** As the workers are mainly illiterate and lack awareness many a times they are paid much lesser than the desired wages. Additionally, they do not enjoy any form of social security. Concept of overtime and payment for additional work is missing. Likelihood of Live-in workers being subjected to harassment is always present. Many a times they are subjected to caste and skill-based discrimination.
- **Insufficient Laws for Protection of Rights:** At the basic level these workers are not covered under any Act. Domestic Workers (Registration, Social Security and Welfare) Bill was drafted in 2008-10 but it was never passed. On similar lines, approval is still waited for Draft Policy on Domestic Workers.
- **Issues in Implementation:** The government has rolled out many Acts and schemes, but the executions remain unsatisfactory. For example, Minimum Wages Act, 1948 recognises domestic work as a part of scheduled employment. Sadly, the execution is poor, with majority workers being paid poorly. legislation for minimum wages for domestic workers has been passed only in 13 states/ UTs. Till date many states have not complied with the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008.
- **Unreliable Data:** Till date the exact number of people engaged in the sector is not clear. There is a huge difference between the official figures and the unofficial ones, with number varying in the range of 4 to 50 million. This acts as a deterrent in proper planning and deployment of resources.
- **Housekeeping and Placement Companies:** These entities are themselves not much formalised and do not abide by the legal framework strictly. Self-interest is at the core and workers' welfare and rights take back seat.
- **Inattention to Domestic Workers' Rights:** As per legislations like the Industry Disputes Act, 1947, the Factories Act, 1948 and the Employee's Provident Fund Act, 1952, work done in households is not considered as labour.
- **Weak Unionisation:** This leads to their weakened negotiation power for better wages. In absence of a union, there is no sound support system available.

4. LEGAL AND REGULATORY GAPS

Domestic work is not recognized under major labor laws like the Industrial Disputes Act (1947), Employees' Provident Fund Act (1952), or Factories Act (1948). This means domestic workers do not have the same protections as other workers.

Legal Challenges Faced by Domestic Workers:

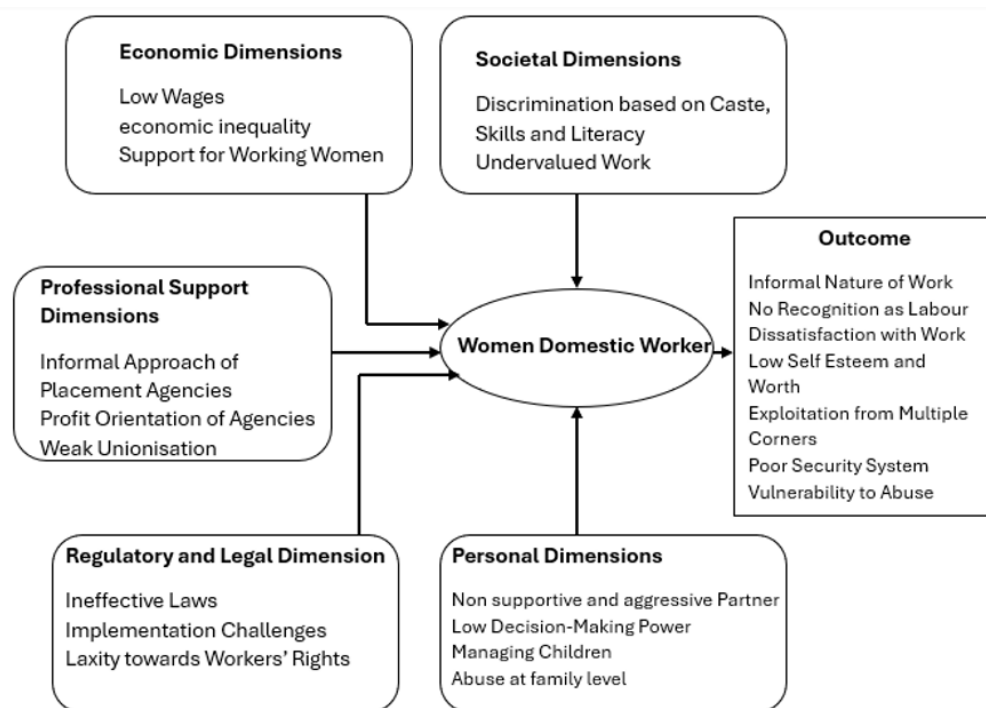
- 1) Minimum Wages Act, 1938:
- 2) Only a few states have included domestic workers under this law. Wages are usually decided informally between the worker and the employer, so it's hard to regulate or set fair minimum wages.
- 3) Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013:
- 4) This law protects women at work, but many domestic workers don't know about it, and it is not applied well. So, it has little effect on their safety (Singh, 2016).
- 5) Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948:

- 6) This was tried in Delhi and Hyderabad in 2016 for domestic workers, but it only gave limited medical help. Important benefits like maternity or sickness leave were left out. Also, the workers have to contribute, which is hard for those earning very little.
- 7) Industrial Disputes Act, 1947:
- 8) Domestic workers are not included in this law, so they have no formal way to deal with unfair treatment or disputes.
- 9) Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008:

This law was made to give informal workers health and social security benefits. But it doesn't work well because many workers are left out, and state-level implementation is uneven (Deshingkar & Sharma, 2013; Dutta & Natarajan, 2015).

5. DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the review of the various literature available in this area and understanding of the dynamics of the sector, it is imperative to suggest a conceptual framework depicting the dynamics of the sector from the female workers' perspective. The following model is suggested based on the review done as a part of this study:



The dynamics of the sector can be understood on the basis of five different dimensions like economic, societal, professional support, regulatory and legal and personal.

Economic dimension deals with the idea that the low wages and exploitation met with these workers lead to economic inequality and disparity. The positive side is that availability of domestic work helps the working women pursue their career and contribute to the economic growth at a macro level. Simultaneously these domestic workers also earn on their own and financially support their families, which has a significant economic impact.

Our current societal set up is the primary reason for undervaluing the domestic work as it is predominantly done by females and is taken for granted. Secondly many a times people hire domestic help as a status symbol. As these workers are unskilled and mostly illiterate, they automatically fall down to the lowest segment in the social ladder.

Regulatory and Legal dimensions include problems like lack of legal recognition as workers, exclusion of such work from workplace protection laws, inconsistent application of Minimum Wages Act, 1948, weak social security coverage and no binding national policy.

Professional support dimensions cover the aspects of poor monitoring and regulation of placement agencies, their informal and profit oriented nature and absence of strong union which can ensure professional support and protection. There is no grievance redressal system to address their issues and problems.

At a family level also women workers face lot of hardships like violent partner, exhausting working hours, poor living conditions, health issues, lack of family support and childcare.

6. PROPOSED MEASURES FOR A POSITIVE SHIFT IN THE SCENARIO

The exclusion of domestic workers from formal recognition as "workers" and the failure to categorize their labor as "productive" in India have contributed to a regulatory gap. Consequently, existing labor laws do not specifically address the unique challenges faced by domestic workers.

To ensure protection and fair treatment of this often overlooked and marginalized workforce, it is imperative to either amend existing labor laws to include domestic workers or enact dedicated legislation. Legal recognition must be paired with effective implementation mechanisms and active civil society engagement to reinforce the rights and dignity of domestic workers. Immediate reforms such as establishing minimum wages and mandating weekly rest days are crucial steps toward improving their working conditions and contributing to national development.

Although India supported the adoption of ILO Convention 189 in 2011—which promotes decent work for domestic workers—it has yet to ratify the convention. That same year, the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) was extended to domestic workers, but only those who are formally registered benefit from this health insurance scheme (Dev and Vijayalakshmi, 2020). Further, in August 2016, a private member introduced a bill in the Lok Sabha that aimed to formally recognize households as workplaces, protect the rights of migrant domestic workers, broaden wage definitions to include benefits like insurance and travel allowance, and mandate written contracts (Virk, 2017). In 2019, the government announced plans for a draft National Policy for Domestic Workers (Rajkotwala and Mehta, 2020), though this, too, remains pending. Now is the time to look back into these laws and policies and mobilise the system for proper implementation.

Many domestic workers continue to work without formal contracts, limited by weak legal protections and minimal bargaining power. Their classification as 'workers' is often symbolic, as societal attitudes and labels such as 'maids', 'servants', and 'helps' continue to undermine their legitimacy. These terms reinforce inequality and a perception that domestic labor is a favor rather than paid work. Therefore, beyond policy development, it is essential to address the entrenched social hierarchies and biases that prevent domestic workers from accessing their rights and achieving a life of dignity.

To effectively address the challenges faced by domestic workers in India, a multi-pronged and committed approach is necessary:

- 1) The availability and quality of data concerning migrant domestic workers must be improved. Accurate data collection will enable better policy formulation and assessment of working conditions within the sector.
- 2) The heterogeneity among domestic workers such as part-time, full-time, and live-in categories makes the establishment of fair minimum wage standards complex. Whether through a need-based formula, time-based, or piece-rate calculations, there is an urgent need to standardize both the type and quantum of work across categories to ensure equity in wage determination.
- 3) Strong social and political will is essential. Without sustained commitment from both government and society, the systemic abuse and exploitation of domestic workers will likely persist.
- 4) Since a large proportion of domestic workers are migrants, interstate coordination becomes crucial. The Union Government can play a key role in facilitating this by introducing a model legislation that States can adapt to suit their specific contexts and requirements.
- 5) The CHRI also advocates for revisiting the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. The act should be revised to include clear and accessible grievance mechanisms for domestic workers, who are often excluded from its protections due to the informal nature of their employment.
- 6) It is vital to promote and sustain worker-led organizations and unions in the domestic work sector. Strengthening these collectives will improve workers' bargaining power. Civil society has an important role to play in fostering such collective action and amplifying the voices of domestic workers.

7. CONCLUSION

Domestic workers in India have long faced various forms of exploitation. their vulnerability is a result of complex dynamics of economic, social and political factors. The absence of specific legal protections, along with weak enforcement of existing laws, has worsened their situation. Both the Union and State governments need to take action by creating a strong, all-inclusive policy and legal framework to safeguard the rights of domestic workers. Any violation of their rights must be addressed with strict measures. Without firm legislation, effective monitoring, and adequate social support, domestic workers will continue to suffer from unfair treatment and poor working conditions. A clear national law is essential to ensure they receive the respect, rights, and protection they deserve.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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