

The Productive ‘Reproductive Work’: A Study On Female Domestic Labourers In Punalur, Kerala

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ABSTRACT: *Domestic work involves with both the productive aspect of reproductive work and the reproductive aspect of productive work, and the private aspect of public sphere the public aspect of private sphere. While specifically considering the existing circumstances of caste-class hierarchy and discrimination prevailing in India, the concept of ‘home as a work place’ cuts across other binaries as well. Experience of domestic workers in encountering this aspect of their work is also given significance in the research. This study aims to understand and explore domestic work from this perspective with a socialist feminist concern, exploring the features of ‘capitalist patriarchy’ entailed in it. It inquisitively examines how female domestic labourers conceive household work. Their work is unpaid in their own house and paid in their working place. Similarly, their working place is a house where they do household activities almost as same as they do at their home, which might question their idea of public-private division of spatiality. The study also interrogates their economic benefits, decision making power, health issues and exhaustion due to the double physical labour, along with a critical enquiry: What belittles domestic work: Domesticity or femininity or the ‘Domesticated femininity’ attached to it?*

KEYWORDS: Domestic labour, paid work, reproductive work, house maids, Kerala

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I. INTRODUCTION

Gender has been constructed and shaped through the socio-cultural circumstances, and as Butler points out, “[g]ender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered health.”¹ Along with the internalisation of gender distinctions, gender division of labour also becomes prevalent. It refers to the social classification of activities and works on the basis of gender. Not focusing on the individual preferences and capabilities, males and female are assigned different activities and tasks. Work is often bifurcated as productive and reproductive, based on the nature of income/outcome it generates. The androcentric social regulations have assigned productive or economic activities to men and reproductive or non-economic activities to women. This not only discriminate men and women, but also adds to women's subordination.

Gender division of labour puts human areas of interests into a limited frame. There are works considered inappropriate to men and women respectively. Gender stereotypes are playing a major role in reinforcing the ascriptions of femininity and masculinity. Women's productive and reproductive works are generally not assigned much economic value. According to the UNDP Human Development Report of 1995, the invisible and unpaid work contributed by women, annually, is worth US \$ 11 trillion.² The same way women's household works are considered invisible and undervalued, women's paid domestic work is also overlooked as something very ‘simple’ and ‘routine’.

The feminization of reproductive work (which can be termed as ‘domestic work’ in common parlance) is an artifact made out of the deliberate dissemination of gender roles and gender division of labour, well-knit with the politics of patriarchy. Even though there are a few countries that acknowledge and reward household work now, for major part of the world, it is still invisible, unpaid and undervalued. When the same work is outsourced to domestic labourers, it becomes a paid work which is visible, yet undervalued as an unskilled labour. As Bell Hooks (1984) articulates, this tendency not only disproves the correlation between economic independence and empowerment of women, but also challenges the basic intention of the demands for ‘wages for house work’³. This study begins from the premise of understanding this undervaluing as a social conception associated with the job and the belittlement of people who do the job, whether within the family or as a paid domestic worker. However, it is important to note that one distinct characteristic of Paid Domestic Work is that

it creates an ambiguous convergence between the defined boundaries of dichotomies of productive work vs. reproductive work, public sphere vs. private sphere, and questions the division.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines a 'domestic worker' as "any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship"⁴. Domestic workers consist of 83% of women workers, which again feminizes the sector. They "are at present among the most exploited and abused workers in the world"⁵. They face multifaceted issues depending on the nature of work and the particulars of worker, clubbed with issues such as low wage, poor working condition, critical family situation, lack of choice, lack of benefits and security, and over all exploitation. In Kerala too, it is a low-status job and many of the domestic labourers like to be identified as 'helpers' rather than workers, or even as 'simple housewives who doesn't earn'. Their experiences underline the fact that "to be able to work and to have to work are two very different matters"⁶. Even though there are a number of organizations to coordinate and protect them now, most of the women in rural areas work independently, due to unawareness or unavailability of such organizations in those areas.

Domestic work involves with both the productive aspect of reproductive work and the reproductive aspect of productive work, and the private aspect of public sphere the public aspect of private sphere. While specifically considering the existing circumstances of caste-class hierarchy and discrimination prevailing in India, the concept of 'home as a work place' cuts across other binaries as well. As Sharma notes down, "The home has remained a physical space in which very often people from the same 'social sphere' are welcomed. While domestic workers interact with employers in their intimate physical space, the interaction and the close presence is in conflict with their respective positions in the social space"⁷. Experience of domestic workers in encountering this aspect of their work is also given significance in the research.

This study aims to understand and explore domestic work from this perspective with a socialist feminist concern, exploring the features of 'capitalist patriarchy' entailed in it. It inquisitively examines how female domestic labourers conceive household work. Their work is unpaid in their own house and paid in their working place. Similarly, their working place is a house where they do household activities almost as same as they do at their home, which might question their idea of public-private division of spatiality. The study also interrogates their economic benefits, decision making power, health issues and exhaustion due to the double physical labour, along with a critical enquiry: What belittles domestic work: Domesticity or femininity or the 'Domesticated femininity' attached to it?

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Women's life activities are normalised and limited to the private sphere, legitimising male oriented social perceptions. Even though many women work in the public sphere, such interventions are treated as supplementary to that of men. Simultaneously, their toil and labour inside the home are commonly considered essentialistic to their roles as women and something that is inappropriate to men. All the nurturing and caring activities like child rearing, cooking, cleaning, washing etc are considered as jobs only women can perform perfectly. At the same time, men are considered to have mastery over works in the public sphere. This adds to the domestication of women. Women's doors are locked from the interiors of the private sphere, in the name of gender division of labour.

However, it seems odd when observing from the angle of gender equality, as it is clear that these so-called feminine ascriptions are being perpetuated through the performances and duties of the family and household by the subordinate women on one side, while in the public sphere, men hold the access to the resources obtained through the same duties and earn their lives in Catering service, cleaning and washing as occupations in public sphere, men occupy the major parts. The same men performing these activities as a part of their profession hesitate to do the same at home. Therefore it is evident that it is not simply the labour, but its benefits also matter.

Domestic labour of women is often unrecognised. It is unpaid and hence women have to depend on the male members of the family for their each and every requirement. Here, the freedom of choices and autonomy of women are being limited. Domestic work as a labour is a job primarily done by women all over the world. Their employment rights, protection and regulation of services and salaries etc are not widely discussed, despite it being a democratic social system. Even though now in Kerala, various associations of domestic labourers are there, they are not able to intervene in the life affairs of majority of the women and attempt political changes thereby.

Domestic labourers perform a range of tasks for and in other people's households. They may cook, clean and wash the laundry, and look after children, the elderly or persons with disability. They may work as gardeners, guardians or family chauffeurs. Most of them are women. They are often excluded, de jure or de facto, from labour and social protection. Part of the reason for this is that domestic work takes place in the interiors of the household and involves, to a large extent, tasks that women have traditionally carried out without pay or remuneration.

Nevertheless, there has been increasing recognition, nationally and internationally, of the economic and social value of domestic work and of the need to improve domestic labourers' living and working conditions. A number of countries have put in place or are formulating legal and policy measures towards this end. These demonstrate that there are varied ways of regulating domestic work. The specific characteristics of domestic work and diverse realities across the world call for innovative and creative approaches to protecting domestic labourers while responding to the needs of families and households that employ them.

The hundredth International Labour Organisation (ILO) Annual Conference held at Geneva, in June 16th, 2011 that included the government, labourer and employer delegates decided to bring an estimated 53 to 100 million domestic labourers worldwide under the realm of labour standards. It aimed at improving the working conditions of tens of millions of domestic labourers worldwide. While addressing the conference, ILO Director-General Juan Somavia reminded the delegates, "We are moving the standards system of the ILO into the informal economy for the first time, and this is a breakthrough of great significance". He reiterated that through such an intervention, "history is being made."⁸

The Convention defines domestic work as the work performed in or for a household or households. While the new venture of the convention of the ILO covers all domestic labourers, they provide for special measures to protect those labourers who, because of their young age or nationality or live-in status, may be exposed to additional risks relative to their peers, among others. The new ILO standards set out that domestic labourers around the world who care for families and households, must have the same basic labour rights as those available to other labourers: reasonable hours of work, weekly rest of at least 24 consecutive hours, a limit on in-kind payment, clear information on terms and conditions of employment, as well as respect for fundamental principles and rights at work including freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. The 2011 ILO estimates based on national surveys and/or censuses of 117 countries, place the number of domestic labourers at around 53 million. However, experts say that due to the fact that this kind of work is often hidden and unregistered, the total number of domestic labourers could be as high as 100 million. In developing countries, they make up at least 4 to 12 per cent of wage employment. Around 83 per cent of these labourers are women or girls and many are migrant labourers.

Women form an integral part of the Indian workforce. As per Census 2011, the workforce participation rate for females is 25.51% against 53.26% for males.⁹ It was 25.63 per cent for women in 2001, 22.27 per cent in 1991 and 19.67 per cent in 1981. There is a slight reduction in the percent from 2001 to 2011, as opposed to the improvements visible from 1981 to 1991 and 2001. The two important aspects that require mention are that while there has been an improvement in the work participation rate of women, it continues to be substantially less in comparison to the work participation rate of men. In 2001, the work participation rate for women in rural areas was 30.79 per cent as compared to 11.88 per cent in the urban areas. In the rural areas, women are mainly involved as cultivators and agricultural labourers. In the urban areas, almost 80 per cent of the women labourers are working in the unorganised sectors such as household industries, petty trades and services, buildings and construction. Even when the reduction of female workforce participation in 2011 be understood in the context of recession, it is alarming that the socio-cultural factors are still keeping women as the 'Hire Slow, Fire Fast' category by the virtue of the stereotyped notion of gender division of labour.

Considering that in developing countries like India, with historically scarce opportunities for formal employment, increased unemployment rate, informalisation of labour and feminisation of the same especially due to globalisation, domestic labourers constitute a significant proportion of the national workforce and remain among the most marginalised. A study conducted on the problems of women in the unorganised domestic sectors in the states of Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu in 1993 portray the exploitation of domestic women labourers. It emphasizes that the structure of the family affects exploitation directly as well as indirectly while stay with the employer results in direct exploitation. It suggests that economic support and skill training to the women of the non-familial structure may enable them to be independent and self reliant.¹⁰ Even after 25 years of the study, the situation remains more or less same in the rural areas.

After the General Session of 42nd Session of Indian Labour Conference on 2009, while a meeting with the Labour Ministers and Senior Officers of State Governments was held, the erstwhile Minister of Labour and Employment pointed out that there is an overarching perception that labour laws were not implemented properly in the country. To improve the implementation machinery, he informed that the Ministry is in the process of developing a format for monitoring every three months different aspects of implementation of factory laws. On RSBY, he informed the Parliament that it is a flagship scheme of the Ministry, which has now been extended to all the districts of the country. He said that in some states the scheme was being implemented successfully while in others the scheme is in very nascent stage of implementation. Such policies for an effective implementation of laws protecting the labourers will be a boon to the workers in the unorganised sector, especially female domestic labourers.¹¹ (State Labour Ministers' Meeting: 2009).

The Kerala State Labour Policy, 2018 proposes to ensure minimum wage for all sections of the employees and making the employment sector more women-friendly. "The policy puts focus on the issue of

gender neutrality in work environment. In organizations where there are women workers, a 'crèche cess' will be collected and crèches will be started in association with the Social Justice Department. The policy envisages a pro-active intervention of the state to ensure proper lodging facilities while travelling, overtime remuneration, weekly leaves, rest intervals etc. for female labourers."¹² Despite the time to time and appropriate democratic interventions from State Government to overcome the unsettled life situations of those in the informal work sector, more and more labourers are trapped to engage themselves in risky areas of labour both in domestic and international arena.

III. METHODOLOGY

For the study, Random Sampling Method is used to conduct Deep Interviews with 15 female domestic labourers belonging to Punalur municipality, Kerala. The respondents belonged to the age group of 25-45. All of them are part-time workers rather than live-in domestic workers. Most of the interviews started as common talks and queries out of curiosity and then the respondents were told about the study. They were requested to answer what they feel deeply about each query and given enough time to articulate their backgrounds. The collected data is analysed qualitatively, from a socialist feminist perspective so as to understand the subjective, lived experiences of the respondents.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Most of the paid domestic labourers in rural Kerala are under-educated, unskilled and belonging to lower caste. In my interactions with the respondents, these three elements were found to be very significant and common. All of them are literate and have received secondary education, but they either failed in their SSLC (10th equivalent exam) or discontinued studies to help the family. Marriage was regarded as the primary aim and achievement in their life, followed by motherhood. They were conditioned to do all the house works from childhood, to be a 'good and ideal woman'. Except for two, all others had arranged marriage. The decision (taken by the respondent or family) to work as a domestic labourer is due to economic constraints in general—either due to husband's inability to wholly provide for the family, or desertion from husband. The former component has varied reasons—alcohol consumption, low wage, physical inability due to ill health, payment of loans and debts etc. Majority of the respondents lack a supportive and understanding spouse.

It is very clear that none of them are aware of any organizations and trade unions that protect them, even though they have seen 'hi-fi' domestic labourers in movies. All of them wish to discontinue the job, once their economic condition is stable. While they were asked, why didn't they opt for any other jobs such as of sales woman or receptionist, some of them said that they were not beautiful or presentable enough to please the customers. This might be due to their inferiority complex and low self-esteem that were seasoned from the family itself. Some others told that their families agreed to send them for domestic work just because they assumed that it is safer to work in the private sphere.

As Anderson (2000) categorizes as "the three C's"¹³, their major works revolve around Cooking, Cleaning and Caring separately or together. They work in their employers' houses as paid domestic helpers and go back to their respective homes where they have to 're-produce' all these works all over again unpaid. Their conceptual approach to the duality of same work in different quantities, qualities, environment and facilities is somewhat the same, in the sense that they think it is their destiny to do all those works as a woman. Most of them 'clarified' me that they are 'helping' their Chechi (literal meaning is elder sister, but here they are referring to the female head of the household where they are working), apprehensive to indicate that they are doing a paid-work. They talk about it as an extension of their household responsibilities, where they are economically helped by the Chechi and Sir in return. This not only problematizes the value attached to domestic work, but also indicate how these women internalize house hold works not enough a 'job' to do with. At the same time, a chef, peon or a room service staff identifies the same work done by them as a job and productive.

However, it is very clear that they are aware of their limitations, lack of choices and the disrespectful amount of distrust by the employers. Many of them pointed out that the elder women in the family or whoever is supervising them used to constantly monitor them on account of cleanliness. It is a common misbelief that cleaners and labourers are 'dirty'. One respondent was verbally abused for feeding the baby with her hand. She recollected that the incident insulted and hurt her so deeply as it indirectly accused her as 'dirty'. This has direct implications to their castes also. One respondent revealed that she is allowed to cook only because she belongs to upper caste. Many of them stressed that whatever they touch in the employers' houses—especially costly plates, cups and fragile items—as a part of cleaning and serving, they do it with much care and fear, unlike in their homes. Similarly, the baby sitters specifically said that even handling the baby is very difficult—as they tend to follow what they do with their own babies at home, but the instructions given by the working mothers are different.

All the respondents complained of physical health issues due to the double work. Even for baby-sitting, they have to carry the baby most of the times. Back pain and knee pain are common to all. Many respondents

have to go back home and fetch water from the wells for their household works. They collect and reserve it in buckets for one whole day. Since their houses and kitchens are not sophisticated and devoid of kitchen appliances, they have to do the entire job again in their homes with a lot more effort. Respondents with relatively small children expressed guilt and grief on their helplessness to spend more time with their own children while coping desperately to meet the two ends together. They also said that they won't feel like eating any good food offered to them which their own children can't have. Three respondents said that their employer women used to send packed food for the domestic workers' children whenever some special food or desserts are made.

Even though most of the interactions happen between the domestic worker and the employer woman of the family, when it comes to salary, it is the head of the household—the man—who hands it over to the worker. Similarly, when the domestic worker wants to take leave for some days, she has to take permission from the employer woman as well as the employer man. All the respondents said that they have a 'fearful respect' to the Sir. On the other hand, they are having a more jovial relationship with the chechi. When it comes to other members of the family—especially in-laws—they are basically more critical towards the domestic worker. The usage of the term Velakkari (which literally means The woman worker, but implies the tone 'servant') has shifted to VeetuJolikkari now (which again literally means The woman domestic worker, but the tone indicates more dignity than Velakkari).

V. CONCLUSION

As Sharma articulates, these narratives actually "give us insight into the contextual forms of power and vulnerabilities which exist as a continuum rather than as two polar opposites. In these contextual power relations—which are deeply embedded in the extra contextual relations—the employers and workers become actors who occupy different locations in the spectrum of power and vulnerabilities"¹⁴. The present study on the lived experience of female domestic labourers in Punalur Municipality area gives a clear picture of the productive 'reproductive' aspects of domestic work. To begin with, it is important to understand that "apart from the employer's sundry household works, maids had to do a lot of tasks for their own family"¹⁵ since the domestic workers have total responsibility for own housework. This itself puts them in a paradox because they are reproducing the same jobs in various environments within various mechanisms.

Also, it can be concluded that the social life situations reinforce the mentality that girls and women are primarily nurturers and caretakers of the family. Their job as domestic labourers seems to naturalise and universalise this aspect rather than looking into the productive aspects of paid domestic labour and the fact that these women are becoming bread winners for their family. This hinders their sense of financial independence and empowerment and paradoxically lowers their social status as individuals. Therefore, it is essential to analyse the issues of paid domestic workers from the angle of the subordinate social positions and life experiences of women. Most of the researches done in the area of domestic labour are based on social and economic factors which defocuses the lived experiences of the women concerned. Therefore, observing and interpreting from an angle, placing women's experiences central to the methodological frame is integral.

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