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Work-households and its relationship with female domestic worker in Kolkata

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Abstract

In this study, the researcher focuses on the experiences of female domestic workers in South Kolkata, West Bengal. Cooking, cleaning, caring - are all semi-skilled jobs, that fall into the unorganised sector where there is no law to protect rights, no health insurance coverage and no pension. This study draws on in-depth interviews to explore the relationships between women domestic workers and their employers in Kolkata in terms of behaviour, working conditions, nature of work, daily sustenance support and allowances. For this article, 30 female domestic workers were asked to reflect on their relationships with their employers, and the workers' responses were analysed using grounded theory to unravel the meaning and to decipher the significance of social interactions, experiences, and relationships amongst the domestic worker and the employers, these justifications are based on the participants' own perceptions or justifications. Three different types of relationships that the workers had with their employers emerged from the analysis: professional, supportive and ill-treated at their workplace. These categories of relationships are examined in terms of some features of the relationship, such as their verbal interactions, the employer's diction, the way they address each other, and reparation, reprimanding etc.

Keywords: Reprimanding, asymmetrical, pragmatic, ill-treated, antagonists

Introduction

India is different from other countries in that it has a large and invisible domestic labour force, although both the supply and demand for domestic workers have grown over time as a result of urbanisation, the rising middle class's income avenues, the rise of nuclear families, the migration of rural to urban areas, and other sociological changes. Women have always been an inseparable partner of the man in the process of societal development. The progress that has led to various modulations in society, are reflected not only in the structure of the family, but also in women's tasks. In addition to her household duties, her contribution to paid work has increased. As a result middle-class working women in the cities are trying to fill this gap with the help of domestic workers. These domestic workers have become an indispensable part of their daily lives. The marginalisation narrative, which portrays informal domestic employment as an exploitative and harmful effort, continues to have a strong hold on studies on the subject. On the other hand, we conceptualise informal domestic work as ingrained in a relational infrastructure of social relationships and reciprocal favours, building on the relational work view from economic sociology (Shahid, and Syed, 2023) ^[19].

Domestic workers make up a significant part of the national workforce in informal employment sector and are among the most exploited groups of workers. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2015) broadly defines a domestic worker as "someone who carries out household work in private households in return for wages". Domestic work is an employment opportunity that is rapidly expanding for poor, uneducated and unskilled women in the informal sector. Domestic workers have a major impact on this female-dominated sector, which is poorly regulated and not protected by labour laws. Domestic work includes all kind of household tasks such as cleaning, cooking, laundry, childcare and elderly care in the private sector under poor working conditions. They face many problems, such as the lack of formal contracts guaranteeing an employer-employee relationship, lack of organisation, weak bargaining power, lack of legal protections and inadequate social measures that do not provide for weekly leave, maternity leave and health benefits, which have yet to be resolved.

These findings give voice to a vulnerable group of workers in contemporary India by highlighting the social relations between female workers and employers of different classes, which are characterised by both compassion and exploitation.

This kind of transactional and impersonal labour interactions has given rise to a number of commonplace ambivalences and conflicts as both employers and employees embrace and reject such impersonal working ties. This is examined through the work-life narratives of commuting domestic workers in Kolkata, drawing on their sense making and interacting with discussions concerning servitude and pragmatic intimacy. It demonstrated how pragmatically commuting people approach and negotiate their jobs and employers, and how, according to their requirements, experiences, and circumstances, they value proximity to employers as well as physical and emotional distance from them inconsistently (Wilks, 2022) ^[18].

This study analyses how the relationships between employers and their domestic workers, whether professional, supportive or with distant hierarchy in the city of Kolkata. Hereby tackling the main query to what degree are informal domestic work interactions, reciprocal as opposed to [or in addition to] being exclusively abusive and exploitative? The research found that employers moved along a continuum that often expressed professional, supportive, hierarchically distant and business attitudes. In both cases, however, the employer was able to reproduce her own identity through the otherization of her domestic workers, and within the employer-employee relationship, social hierarchies were reproduced and maintained through every day acts of differentiation, including language, gifts, working conditions, etc. (MacDonald, 2006) ^[13]. Women workers earn little money and are often overworked, abused, and malnourished and suffer psychologically from the workplace. The relationship between employer and employee is crucial to understanding the work environment, and control over this relationship can make it more or less professional, either benefiting or harming workers.

Review of literature

Dickey 2000 ^[20], the relationship between employer and employee is asymmetrical because it is a labour relationship, social capital is different, and the workplace is the employer's home. This study extends the concept of interior and exterior spaces to understand how these boundaries are carefully managed within the relationship to maintain family status while managing perceived threats to privacy, property, and sexual purity. Employers are mindful of their employees' modesty and carefully control where workers are in the home, how they use the restrooms and interact with children. This is extremely isolating and degrading for domestic workers, in addition to the other dangers of abuse they face. Other studies show the relationship between employer and employee can be highly interdependent and shapes the way both partners (Employee and employer) define, evaluate and locate themselves in society (Andersen & Chen, 2002) ^[21]. Sharangpani 2008, showed that the women employees also acted as confidants for employers and helps to alleviate some of the social expectations and stress that employers have as women. This can be particularly important for young women who lead non-traditional lifestyles, who face particularly high levels of social stress or strain in their marriages, or who are

separated from their families. At the household level, many women who employ domestic workers do not see themselves as formal employers. Instead, they see themselves as consumers of domestic services and refer to the women working in their household as 'the help', or they refer to domestic workers as 'part of the family', ignoring the documented power imbalance between employer and employee (Kennedy, 2012) ^[10].

Domestic work relationships, where employers manage and financially compensate domestic workers in return for constant work in the employer's private home, are widespread and have far-reaching social and economic consequences. The work of Gorbán (2014) examines how high expectations and extreme control lead to a facade, a persona that employees put on to fulfil employers' expectations of them, including stereotypes. A job is also impossible if the employer performs it, but merely helps if a domestic worker performs it, a deliberate dissonance that appeases any perceived threat. The façade plays on inferiority by reflecting a power imbalance through changes in behaviour and language. This expectation affects workers' ability to stand up for them in the workplace. Ghose & Godley (2020), examines the experiences of female domestic workers in Kolkata, India, focusing on the relationships between the workers and their employers. Three categories emerged from the analysis, indicating three different types of relationships between the workers and their employers. This qualitative approach shows a deep understanding of the nature of the relationship between the employers and their employees. Pramberger (2021), pointed out that the relationship between employer and employee is crucial to understanding the work environment, and that control over the relationship can make it more or less professional, either benefiting or harming employees. Employers often refer to their employees as family members, doing them favours and being sympathetic to some of their daily struggles and receiving emotional support.

Objective

This study focuses on the relationship of female domestic workers with their work place household members, which basically reflects on their wages, working hours, interpersonal behaviour and other support when needed, etc.

Methodology

The primary data for this paper was drawn from a larger study on the status of female domestic workers in the South Kolkata region of West Bengal. A descriptive structure was created to analyse the above objectives. For the in-depth data collection, female domestic workers aged between 20 to over 60 years working as paid domestic workers in the household at south Kolkata were selected. A semi-structured interview schedule was designed to collect information from 30 respondents who were selected using the purposive sampling method randomly as they agreed to talk to the researcher. The collected data was analysed using simple statistical tools.

All the respondents were residents of the city's periphery or hinterlands. They travel to the city at the crack of dawn via the local rail, where they laboured in many residences until dusk, at which point they head back home. Approximately every woman the researcher spoke to describe her commuting from home to work as an approximately hour-

long train ride in a compartment crowded with co-workers. This is a qualitative study using methods from oral narration using a semi-structured schedule and the recording of in-person interviews on their views and principles, job terms and circumstances, and job interactions.

This approach was adopted to extract additional information from a group of respondents who were mainly illiterate. It also enabled to better understand their sometimes disjointed personal narratives, which featured a jumbled juxtaposition of facts and recollections and make sense of the themes that were reflected within what they said. These interviews were conducted to gather information about employment relations, terms and conditions, attitudes and values. The women frequently talked candidly about their lives and means of subsistence, and in return, they questioned a lot and occasionally redefined (For very legitimate reasons) the parameters of the researcher's interaction with them. These unrestrained and unfiltered conversations, in the opinion of the present researcher, made up a really fascinating corpus of oral life histories about their work place household members and their own socio-economic conditions and familial relationship at home and in the work household.

Discussion

Domestic labour has its historical roots in both slavery and

feudalism from the ancient society, and a structural analysis of domestic labour shows how inequalities of class, race, and gender are part of and produced by capitalism. However this study showed that although these workers usually function under systems of restricted opportunity, their employment relationships include an implicit sociological component of reciprocal advantages and disadvantages.

Men and women are viewed as members of distinct social realms rather than as antagonists or complements in the Marxist theory of the reproduction of labour. Women are viewed as both wage workers and domestic helpers, whereas men are exclusively perceived as wage labourers. Marxist feminists also contend that remuneration for domestic labour lends economic worth to what is still mostly viewed as women's labour and that domestic labour should be valued equally to reproductive work. Althusser claimed that "the family is an archetypal ideological apparatus" that, in contrast to oppressive state apparatuses, depends on permission and socialisation rather than compulsion or violence for reproduction. The domestic worker participates in this process both in her own family and in the families of other classes where they give their services. Domestic work is a solution to the issue of women in the economic system if we look at it globally. For domestic workers, the job is disorganised, unfulfilling, and unacknowledged.

Table 1: Working status and Socio economic background of respondents based on employer employee relationship.

Age		20 - 35						36 - 50						51 and above						
Category of Work		Part Time			Partial Part time			Part Time			Partial Part time			Part Time			Partial Part time			Percent
Relationship Status		P	S	I	P	S	I	P	S	I	P	S	I	P	S	I	P	S	I	%
Marital Status	Unmarried	1	1																	6.7
	Married	1	1					2	7	3	2			1	3	2	1	2		83.3
	Others								1						1			1		10
Nature of Work	Caring								1						1			2		13.3
	Domestic		1	3				1	4	2	1			1	1	2	1	1		60
	Cooking							1	3	1	1				1					26.7
Daily Subsistence support	Tiffin		1	2				1	8	2	2			1	4	1	1	4		90
	Lunch								1									2		10
	Washroom		1	2				1	8	1	2			1	4	1	1	3		83.3
	Using Dining		2	2				2	7		1			1	3		1	3		73.3
Allowances	Bonus		2	1				1	8	3	2			1	4	2	1	3		93.3
	Extra Money								3						1			1		13.3
	Cloths			1					4					1	4		1	3		46.7
	Others								2							1		2		16.7
Extra work	With Pay			1						1						1				10
	Without Pay		2	1					2	7	3	2			1	3	2	1	3	90
Extra Leave	Yes			1					1	2						2			1	23.3
	No		2	1					1	6	3	2			1	2	2	1	2	76.7

Codes: Relationship: Professional-P; Mutually supportive-S; Ill-treated-I

This study includes narratives on the experiences of thirty female domestic workers who served as informants through in-depth interviews. These female domestic workers' accounts demonstrated that they could articulate the nature of their labour with clarity. A working connection with the employer and workspace are two elements that influenced how the meaning of the job was constructed and female domestic workers' narratives demonstrated their capacity to provide constructive meaning (Astagini and Sarwono, 2019) [2].

In the table above it is revealed that of the total 30 respondents, 83.3% were married, 10% were widowed or separated and only 6.7% were unmarried. After thematically compartmentalizing their narratives the researcher found that the interview data of the respondents could give, three

main types of relationships: professional, supportive and ill-treated relationships. Among the participants in this study, 26.7% of women described their relationships with their household member at work as professional, 56.7% called it as supportive and 16.7% said they were ill-treated by their employers narratives from the interviews to illustrate the sub-themes that emerged under each main theme.

While discussing the relationship patterns with the researcher their narrations highlighted the dynamic interpretations and practices in doing household labour that was prompted by the interconnected relationships of human choices, cultural philosophies, and societal backdrops. In academic discourse, the worth of domestic workers has been established in relation to macro financial factors and meanings that people to give to it. The concept of

meaningfulness is multifaceted, comprehending the reasons why people give meaning to their work - lives, and the various forms that meaning may take as per locations where it is found, and the ways in which meaning is perceived (Baumeister, and Vohs. 2002) [3]. Viktor Frankl (2006) [5] is considered as a trailblazer, and subsequent scholars have recognised that people seek purpose in their lives. There are four fundamental demands that make up the overall desire for meaningfulness: (1) purpose, (2) principles, and (3) effectiveness and (4) self-worth in oneself (Mackenzie and Baumeister 2014) [14]. Here respondents spoke about relationships between experiences and the desire that differed, and coincided and made them feel satisfied and dissatisfied too. They gave their elaboration of the household of work as a source of meaningfulness and an analytical framework for understanding their plights and their perceptual sense making about their interpersonal relationship at workplace.

The first type of relationship is professional. The main characteristics of this relationship are: lack of communication, low expectation of on-going commitment, and a flexible work schedule. Employees come and ask what to do or cook, complete the task and leave. Sometimes employers offer something to eat, but not regularly. They know very little about their employer and the household have never told anything about their private life. Domestic workers only do extra work for their employers if they are paid for it, and the employer also pays extra money for their extra work. They hesitated to share their personal problems and even ask for help in emergency situations. This relationship is undemanding and free of many expectations. Occasionally there are gifts and bonuses for religious ceremonies, which are usually determined at the time of recruitment. In summary, the women who described their relationship with their employer as professional recognized that neither they nor the employer derived any greater benefit from each other than that already derived from the working relationship. Some verbatims below showed the household relationship with their employer professional.

When asked about the employer one worker aged 34 told that 'Babohar kharap na, maine ekdom-i kaatha barate chay na. Majhe modhye kaj ses beronor somay emon kaj bole, seta korte giye train miss hoye jay birokt lage. Amar train timings ta mone rakhata proyejon bole mone korena'. Another one (aged 31) argued that "Ami 3te barite ranna kori. Onara sabayi amake biswas kore, tayi pahara dite ashena. Ki korte hobe seta bolle dile ranna kori. Besi time thake na onno barite deri hoye jay. Jai jeta bole kori besi personal koth batra hoy na." "Ami onader baper besi janina. Onara bolen na r ami jigasao kori na. Jai kaj gulo bole kori chole asi," said 33 years old women.

The above narrations speak of the employee being professional, not indulging in any personal or emotional interaction and employers are professionally indifferent to employee concerns, leading to feelings of frustration, isolation, and ultimately affecting overall morale in the workplace. The above narrations spell that the investigation concentrated on how the female respondents working in different households interpreted that the employers' ideas of the other, and how they conceptualised labour ties and personal relationships, and how they conceptualised paid domestic employment inside the family. In this study, employers represented a spectrum and frequently expressed impersonal attitude, opaque hierarchy and commercial

relationships. However, through the otherization of her domestic work, the employer was able to identify her as a culturally different entity, replicate social hierarchies that were reproduced and upheld in the employer-employee relationship through every day acts of differentialization, such as language use, talking less, giving orders, alienating working conditions (MacDonald, 2006) [13].

The second type of relationship was a supportive relationship. Domestic workers who were in this relationship with their employers had been working with them for a long time or longer and had developed familial relationships with the household. Both were respectful and responsive to each other. These supportive and caring relationships are described by the employers standing by them in difficult times by giving them money and supporting their children in their education, giving them guidance and help with technical tasks and other things. When the employer's family goes on holiday, they always bring lots of gifts for their domestic help. They also help with health problems, banking matters and so on. They have reached a level of trust where the employer hands out copies of the house keys and leaves the child with her in her absence. They are allowed to use her washrooms, tiffin is compulsory; offered fruit and are also invited for meals. This shows that the caring relationship supports and encourages workers to be trustworthy, reliable and dependable. These supportive relationships between workers and employers are shifting from formal to informal relationships.

Many women who employ domestic helpers in their homes do not consider themselves to be official employers. They refer to the women who work in their houses as 'the help,' instead of seeing themselves as consumers of domestic services (Hoobler, 2016; Kennedy, 2012) [7, 10]. Alternatively, they could refer to domestic workers as part of the extended family, downplaying the established power disparity between employer and employee (Anderson, 1997; Galvaan *et al.*, 2015; Kennedy, 2012) [1, 6, 10]. The majority of domestic workers are viewed as invisible in society, the economy, and the legal system as a result of these circumstances. Some cases mention below which showed the household relationship with their employer supportive and caring.

One respondent aged 56 said that "Onok din dhore ei barite kaj kori. Ora khub valo. Boyos hoyeche tai halka kaj gulo kori. Onno ekjon ke-o kaje rekheche. Pray din dupure khai. Pujote amar nati-natir jonno o jama kapor dey." It shows the household is concerned about the welfare of this employee. Another one aged 43 told that "Boud khubi valo. Amake chara onno kauke rakhbe na, lockdown-er por kichudin onno kajer lok rekhechilo kintu ami asle take chariye dey. Onk sahajjo kore, covid-e sahajjo korechilo. This verbatim shows that trust and dependency has strongly interrelated them. A worker aged 54 argue that "Ami 6 hazar taka pai. Kintu dorkar porle onk sahajjo kore. Meyer porasonar jono ekbar 10 hazar dhar diyechilo sodh kore diyechi. Swamir operation-er jonno 20 hazar niyechilam ota ekhon sodh korchi aste aste." It shows that a helpful and support system exists in their relationship with household. One said (age 51) "Etu khit khit kore, maine barate chay na, tobe khub valo. amake onek biswas kore, pray din khai. Jekono proyojone sahajjo peyechi. Ghurte gele amar jonno-o kichu na kichu ane." Getting gifts or other items boost their relationship stronger.

Employers' emotional rewards are also derived from hiring domestic workers, in addition to the pragmatic and symbolic benefits. This is most frequently accomplished by fostering a maternalistic bond with their domestic helps by the giving of gifts-old or used material possessions-that they frequently designated as their act of charity or by providing cash support during difficult times. Sen and Sengupta favour their own definition of 'pragmatic intimacy,' which they argue speaks to workers' agency by acknowledging their attempts to build reciprocal relationships with employers and suggests the paradox of a relationship that is at once dominating and mutual, distant and intimate, exploitative and caring (Sen and Sengupta, 2016) ^[17]. The findings indicate that while commuters' perceptions of the good (bhalo) employer still reflect the familial ideal, materialistic pursuits they also actively seek out and maintain relationships with their employers that are trustworthy and familial in nature. This analysis rather supports Sen and Sengupta's theory of 'pragmatic intimacy' which spells the paradox of a relationship (p. 150), as well as Ozyegin's concept of 'intimacy work' (Ozyegin, 2001; Wilks, 2022) ^[16, 18].

In a relationship like this, both parties take the most advantage that meets their own interests in the *contact spaces*- household where they work as domestic helps, where the unequal class connection is both challenged and replicated in close physical proximity in the context of daily life. However, it seems sense that employers have a lot more authority to shape this connection given the hierarchical class relationship that exists between the dialectical connection of employer and employee.

Sometimes domestic workers were not treated nicely and exploited at their workplaces. They designate this as ill-treatment. They told about clear forms of abuse and exploitation that these domestic workers are subjected to in their workplaces. The house lady supervised the work, although she never directly demanded anything, but always oversaw and even counted the ingredients used for cooking. The employer thought that the worker might have stolen some of her spices, vegetables, wheat and pulses while cooking. They are suspected when something goes missing in a house; they are the first to be accused of stealing something, even without a second thought. Some employers force them to do extra tasks without being paid, but when they demanded more money for extra work, their employer threatened to fire them. Employers do not provide food or anything to eat. If they do, they try to maintain social status and give leftovers from the freezer. They don't like employees using their washrooms, dining table, etc. They do not benefit from each other in this working relationship. Exploitation was avoided, but requests for favours and for help in emergency situations was also clearly excluded. Some cases mention below which showed how the household ill-treated or misbehaved with their employer.

One worker aged 46 said that: "Ami rannar kaj kori, samne kichu bole na kintu chal ber kora ba ranna korar somay pase bose thake, sondeho kore jodi khe feli kinba lukiye niye ni." From this verbatim it can be inferred that the householder's keep domestic helper for their need but they have a feeling of suspicion towards them. Respondent aged 51 said that: "Onader bed room ami poriskar kori kintu bed-e bosa kinba poriskar-er jonno bed sheet, cover amake nite dey na, ami hat di pochondo koren na, onarai ber ore den." Despite all the work, the demeaning attitude of some house owners

towards the workers is reflected in this verbatim. Another one aged 39 claimed that "Amake to ekbar sondeho korechilo jokhon main gate-er chaabi paowa jachilo na, tarpor onar jama kapor poriskar korte giye night dress-er poket theke chabi pai. Tarpor ami sei bari chere di." A women aged 49 said that "Ami 4te barite thiker kaj koripiskar kora, bason maja ei sob. Ekta bari emoni suchibai j majhe modhye eki jayga du-bar machay, bason du-bar kore dhute hoy. Onader bathroom-e gele kemon vabe takay"

The above narrations relate to distrust and devaluing the work done by them. Domestic workers labour in an oversupplied, uncontrolled industry where they are frequently exploited. These horrible working circumstances are a direct outcome of patriarchal countries' historical devaluing of domestic labour, which has worsened employer-employee relations and encouraged acquiescence in or active involvement in dehumanizing behaviours. A lack of consequences for this mistreatment of their employees is guaranteed by the privilege and complicity of the whole class of employers. One of the main contributing factors to the invisible nature of domestic labour is the failure to acknowledge the house as a place of employment (Narain, 2022) ^[15]. The first reason for this is that any labour that does not result in a measurable, physical commodity or service that can be consistently valued as insignificant is seen as unimportant by the capitalistic worldview.

The devaluation is also linked to the historical practice of assigning women to do all home chores than contributing to societal advancement is institutionalised. Notwithstanding the numerous feminist criticisms of the notion that the home is the exclusive and natural location of female labour and affect, the logic of women's work is perpetuated and transferred to domestic help, who struggle with being minimised in their work and acting as their employer's labour substitutes. Simultaneously, the gendered familialism hypothesis postulates that a woman's freely provided, naturally occurring love and care is the driving force behind her care and helping work. Thus, these antiquated ideas are threatened by the very demand of domestic workers who perform this as full-time employment in exchange for remuneration (Narain, 2022) ^[15]. Journalist Tripti Lahiri chronicled the lived experiences of domestic workers employed throughout India in her book *Maid in India: Stories of Inequality and Opportunity Inside Our Homes* (2017). She discovered that employers persist in keeping a physical and ceremonial distance from their employees, mirroring in daily life the inflexible social hierarchies and the ensuing norms of segregation and unmistakably defining the value and dignity of employers in relation to these female employees.

Conclusion

Even within a relatively small sample, the study revealed a wide variety of relationships between domestic workers and their employers. These relationships differ in terms of formality, intimacy and equality, but they are clearly gendered and characterised to varying degrees by class issues. A harmonious relationship between employer and employee depends on various factors, such as mutual trust, safe working conditions, timely payment of wages or salary, satisfaction and high self-esteem of employees, social benefits provided by the employer, etc. A poor relationship also depends on the verbal interaction, the employer's diction and the way they address each other and can lead to

misunderstandings resulting in conflicts, complaints, grievances and exploitation.

Researcher also noted that good behaviour by employers in the form of gifts and kindness is something that domestic workers appreciate, and it may be more important than their salary. So analysis the relationships between employees and employers are very complicated. There is also a high correlation between the two factors, such as no annual wage increase and the fact that domestic workers are expected to leave on holidays. Respondents who have problems related to vacations state that they are expected to do more work than they are employed to do. The analysis shows that the relationship between domestic workers and their employers is unsatisfactory on average. At the same time, however, they often know very little about the material conditions of their employees. Employers indicated that they try to make conscious decisions about the way they treat their employees and they show sensitivity and awareness of past concerns.

The paper has argued that women domestic workers are highly vulnerable to exploitation, and their identity in terms of gender, caste, class, creates complex forms of intersectional disadvantages. They do enjoy some opportunities and some privileges but that is restricted to only a few households. The feminisation of domestic work and the consequent devaluation of work make the intersectional disadvantages, humiliation, harassment, and exploitation generally invisible. The scenario calls for multi-stakeholder interventions and social action to create decent workspaces to improve the working conditions and social well-being of these women domestic workers.

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