



Post Covid-19 Impact on Female Domestic Workers in the Slums of Kusumpur Pahari, New Delhi, India, 2021: A Case Study

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Abstract:

Domestic workers provide a strong support system in the sub-strata of the Indian society and yet remain unrecognized for the efforts that they field in. Their work is undervalued, underpaid and poorly regulated. This paper attempts to highlight the hardships faced by domestic workers in the post COVID-19 era, ranging from economic and social security issues to the issue of domestic violence and sexual harassment. In the end, this paper makes an attempt to draw some recommendations for combating the challenges and stagnation faced by domestic workers. It is based on primary research of ten respondents based on in-depth interview and qualitative and quantitative data collection.

Keywords: *Domestic work, employers, COVID-19 pandemic, hardships*

1. Introduction

In India, domestic work has conventionally been placed at the bottom of the occupational structure with low social status and institutional ignorance. The absence of political and legal recognition has left domestic workers structurally and procedurally susceptible to the conditions of poverty and at the mercy of their employers, exposing them to potential harassment, discrimination and exploitation.

Due to the prolonged nationwide lockdown, there had been stifling of economic activity, resulting in increased hardships and financial challenges for Indian domestic workers. Even after the opening up of the economy post COVID-19, revival has been slow and many people in the unorganized sector, especially female domestic workers continue to face challenges like loss of jobs, reduced wages, sexual harassment, increased working hours and uncertainty about their future.

This paper attempts to understand the impact of the COVID-19 shock on the female domestic workers in the Kusumpur Pahari slum, located behind the CBI colony in Vasant Vihar, New Delhi. The place is inhabited by more than two lakh migrant families, mainly comprising of people engaged in unorganized sector i.e., domestic workers, labourers, painters and masons.

It had been observed that despite the risk of contracting the virus, many domestic workers were being compelled to go to work as they struggle to procure basic necessities like food, shelter and medications amidst the crude circumstances. They were being persuaded by their employers to continue working and were even threatened with possible replacement.

Furthermore, since domestic work falls under the unorganized and unregistered work category, in most cases, these workers were unable to access government relief packages that were being provided to deal with the current crisis. This implies that a high number of domestic workers weren't even beneficiaries of the state government's Public Distribution System (e.g., grain allotment program), therefore leaving them with limited access to food-related benefits.

Adding to the issues of loss of income and absence of social security, domestic workers also face harassment and eviction from their rented accommodations. This was either due to their inability to pay rent or due to the social stigma attached with these workers that labels them as potential carriers of the virus, ultimately leading to their ostracization from the society.

Lastly, many of the workers who lost their jobs had to stay at home for long durations, thereby increasing chances of infringement of their human rights in the form of increased domestic violence and physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their spouses, thereby exacerbating their already deplorable situation. Although human rights violations at the workplace against female domestic workers is nothing new and data released by the Government of India study in 2014 shows an annual increase in domestic violence and sexual harassment against them, the circumstances during the pandemic has only increased the plight of these workers.

The paper is organized as follows: First we give the objective of the study i.e., problems faced by female domestic workers in the post COVID-19 era in Kusumpur Pahari, New Delhi. It is followed by the literature review and the research methodology used, which is a primary research based on both qualitative and quantitative data. Towards the end, the paper highlights the discussions and findings based on primary data, followed by conclusion and recommendations.

2. Location

The location of the study is Kusumpur Pahari slum area, behind the CBI colony in Vasant Vihar, New Delhi. This is one of the largest slums in Delhi and is inhabited by more than two lakh migrant families.



Figure 1: Google map of Kusumpur Pahari

3. Objective of the Study

The main purpose of the research study is to understand and diagnose the issues of female domestic workers, including their loss of income and earnings during post COVID-19 pandemic in Kusumpur Pahari slum area. The study also aims to understand the possible strategies to cope up with the problems. The findings from the study will produce evidence that will inform the development of a focused intervention, thereby improving the status of female domestic workers in Kusumpur Pahari.

4. Literature Review

A study conducted by Brinda Karat on the Pandemic Lockdown and the Impact on Women discussed how the coronavirus pandemic affected women in varying degrees. This includes increase in domestic abuse, increased burden of domestic and care work and the resulting impact on women's health. An article of BBC News titled "Coronavirus: How India's lockdown sparked a debate over maids" discusses

the plight of domestic workers, many of whom have lost their jobs or are not being paid salaries for the lockdown period. In a study conducted by the Indian School of Development Management (ISDM) and IIMPACT(NGO) in over 4800 households Rajasthan, Haryana, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Jharkhand, it was found that the loss of income and livelihoods, availability of food and drinking water and impact on children's education have emerged as the top immediate concerns of communities in rural India during the pandemic and lockdown phase of 2020.

5. Research Methodology

A total of ten households from Kusumpur Pahari slum were identified to conduct the study between the time period of one month i.e., January to February, 2021. Initial field visits involved identifying key local leaders and community members, after the identification of actors of intermediation, in-depth interviews were conducted with the female domestic worker from each household. Preventive measures of social distancing were followed during the visits.

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed in the context of the study objectives. Quantitative data was tabulated and was statistically analyzed. Qualitative data was interpreted based on the observations and the information collected from the field.

6. Socio-Demographic Data

Table 1: Socio-demographic data of respondents in Kusumpur Pahari

| Sr. | Name | Age | Married/ Unmarried/ Widow/ Separated | Religion | Occupation of other family members | No. of family members | No. of Children | Migrant from |
|-----|-----------------|-----|---|----------|--|--------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| 1 | Shanti Devi | 30 | Married | Hindu | Husband: labourer | 5 | 3 | Bihar |
| 2 | Hazira Begum | 45 | Separated | Muslim | Married daughter: Domestic worker, son-in -law: tea seller | 7 | 3 | West Bengal |
| 3 | Vidyawati Mahto | 34 | Married | Hindu | Husband: daily wage labourer | 7 | 4 | Uttar Pradesh |
| 4 | Sharda Rani | 43 | Married | Hindu | Husband: vegetable seller | 12 | 5 | Uttar Pradesh |
| 5 | Poonam Kumari | 22 | Married | Hindu | Husband: Manson | 6 | 1 | Bihar |
| 6 | Nagina Tharwar | 48 | Married | Muslim | Husband: Not working | 10 | 3 | Bihar |
| 7 | Rajkumari | 49 | Widow | Hindu | None | 5 | 2 | Uttar Pradesh |
| 8 | Neetu Kumari | 36 | Married | Hindu | Husband: Rickshaw puller, brother-in-law: cook in a dhaba | 6 | 2 | Uttar Pradesh |
| 9 | Kanchan Bari | 42 | Widow | Hindu | Mother-in-law: domestic worker | 10 | 6 | Uttar Pradesh |
| 10 | Shareefa Bano | 25 | Separated | Muslim | Single earning member | 2 | 2 | West Bengal |

Source: Primary data collection

Table 1 shows the vital statistics of female domestic workers of Kusumpur Pahari between the age group of 22 to 49 years.

7. Ethical Consideration

Full consent was obtained from the participants prior to the study. The protection of the privacy of research participants was ensured. Adequate level of confidentiality of the research data was ensured. Anonymity/change of names of individuals participating in the research was ensured.

8. Discussions and Findings

After completion of the survey, the next step was to analyze the survey data. This required systematic tabulation of the questionnaire and analysis of the data collected, followed by a tabulation of results.

The research study is based on a set of questionnaires that gives a reflection of the hardships faced by female domestic helpers' post COVID-19 era.

- **Increase or decrease in income post COVID-19 era**

Majority of the respondents said that their income decreased post COVID-19 pandemic because people were not ready to employ them or were insisting to work on a lower salary. Two of them told that they have been retained by their previous employers on the same terms and conditions as pre COVID-19. But now their working hours have increased as their employers were avoiding hiring more than one domestic help due to the fear of getting infected with the virus.

- **On the subject of getting vaccinated**

Majority of the respondents said that they were not interested in getting themselves or their family members vaccinated as they could not afford to take time off their work to escort their family members or elderly and care for them afterwards if needed. Moreover, they did not have any idea of where and how to get the vaccine. The fear of losing even a day's salary was very real for many people who had to pay back huge debts accumulated during the lockdown. Many of the respondents were ill-informed about the possible side effects of vaccination. Those with co-morbidities like diabetes or hypertension were worried.

- **Views of respondents on social distancing and wearing masks**

Majority of the respondents had a very casual attitude about wearing the mask and washing hands. However, they said that when they go to work, they wear mask more out of compulsion rather than willingness.

- **Work-related discrimination post COVID-19 era**

1. **Overtime-** Two of the respondents expressed that their employers insisted that they work full time and stay at the workplace to avoid the spread of the virus. The employers were even willing to pay overtime for those employees who were ready to stay at the workplace. However, those respondents who lost their jobs were not paid anything.

2. **Deduction in Salary-** Few of the respondents were being paid reduced salaries as their employers were themselves receiving salary cut amid pandemic.

- **Verbal/ physical abuse by husband/family member**

During and post COVID-19 lockdown, the NFHS-4 had shown that almost one third (31 per cent) of the married women had suffered physical, sexual or emotional violence at the hands of their spouses, with physical abuse being the most common. In the research study, it was found that most of the respondents were at the receiving end of getting beaten or being inflicted by some kind of physical abuse by their spouses. Moreover, in India, there has been a correlation seen in the excessive consumption of alcohol and domestic violence. The COVID-19 pandemic took away the employment of lakhs of people, which pushed them into financial stress and debt trap. Hence, the male members of the family took their frustration on their wives under the influence of alcohol, leaving women in the worst position.

- **Rate of food supplies post COVID-19 era**

Due to financial loss and reduction in salaries, adequate and nutritious food supplies were not available to the respondents. The spouses or family members of most of the respondents were daily

wage labourers, who had either lost their jobs or had to work on reduced salaries. Moreover, their work also got temporarily shut down due to uncertainty post the pandemic. Few of the respondent's spouses were employed in dhabas, which started functioning post-pandemic and they began to work again. There were few respondents whose spouses faced hardships to get any kind of work and were unemployed since the pandemic lockdown and were the worst sufferers of the virus. Without money, the respondents found it very difficult to get access to food for their family members. Few of them did not have valid identity proof, hence could not avail the subsidized facilities of the public distribution system. Without adequate and nutritious food, the children in these families suffered from malnutrition and got extremely weak.

- **Have you been able to pay for the following in the past few months?**

1. **House rent-** Few of the migrant workers told that they were being pressured by their landlords to either pay the rent or leave the accommodation. It was observed that few of them or their family members chose to sell fruits and vegetables due to loss of job/ unsettled dues and that it was quite difficult for them as this was a new thing for them. Others told that they were allowed to stay at their accommodation by paying 50% of the rent.
2. **Children's school fees-** The respondents of the study were the people belonging to the lowest strata of society, whose living condition deteriorated post the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the respondents' children studied in government schools but few of them also studied in private schools. Some of the private schools have relaxed the deadline for the payment of fees but no school has condoned the payment of fees. Children who failed to pay the fee were often debarred from appearing in online exams or the distribution of report cards.

- **Access to online classes by children**

It has been more than a month since private and government schools in the city have been providing online classes and sharing study materials through various digital platforms with their students. However, many of the students have been struggling to access the classes because of poor internet connectivity and lack of devices that support such classes. The emergence of virtual education during the lockdown has further created a 'class division' among the rich and the poor, especially those from the economically weaker section (EWS). The attendance of these students dropped after a few days of launching the virtual classes due to low internet data and the non-availability of wi-fi connections at home.

- **Stress faced by people**

1. **Fear of contracting the COVID-19 virus-** The respondents had the fear of getting infected with coronavirus as this would take away their jobs and they would become helpless. The virus harms the body, which does not allow them to engage in any kind of work, be it household chores or outside work to earn money. Some of the families have sole bread earners and hence, they cannot afford to be infected by the virus.
2. **Lack of alternative livelihood options-** On the issue of losing their jobs, some of the respondents told that could not get alternative work and there is still uncertainty whether they would get work in the future or not. Other respondents said that as they were unskilled, their future is dark due to the scarcity of jobs adding to their lack of skills.
3. **Being stigmatized as a possible transmitter of COVID-19-** People who tested positive for coronavirus had to face ostracization from the society. There were numerous examples wherein people were subjected to immense discrimination and attacks from the society. They faced difficulty in getting acceptance from the society as well as in their homes. One of the respondents' employer had her tested as she had to mind their children, so they could not take the risk.

9. Conclusion

An analysis of the case study of the interviewed female domestic workers depicts that they have suffered considerably during the COVID-19 crisis. Many of them lost their livelihood during the crisis. Those who were able to retain their jobs had to cope with lower incomes. Most of the respondents complained about an increase in domestic violence either at home or at the workplace. Several respondents admitted

that the education of their children suffered due to harassment at school for non-payment of fees or their inability to access online classes due to lack of mobile phones or laptops or internet connectivity. Majority of the respondents complained of difficulty in accessing medical facilities in hospitals as most of the hospitals and their staff were focused on handling and treating coronavirus related patients.

10. Recommendations

- Rights of domestic workers for fair terms of employment that are no less favourable than other workers should be legally recognized to provide dignity to their work.
- There should be active participation and involvement of state governments in addressing the issues concerning domestic workers like fixing minimum wages, regulating working hours and providing social security benefits etc. This can go a long way in mitigating the hardships of domestic workers especially during a crisis like the coronavirus pandemic.
- Mapping of domestic workers by state governments should be done. An exhaustive database on domestic workers can help in preventing the trafficking of women and children for domestic work and formulating policies for them.
- Engagement with Resident Welfare Association's to ensure better working conditions and job security for domestic workers as well as holding discussions with these associations on the need for improving employer-employee relations and safer workplaces for domestic workers.
- Domestic workers should be encouraged to organize themselves into labour unions so that they can raise their voice and grievances in a better way.

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